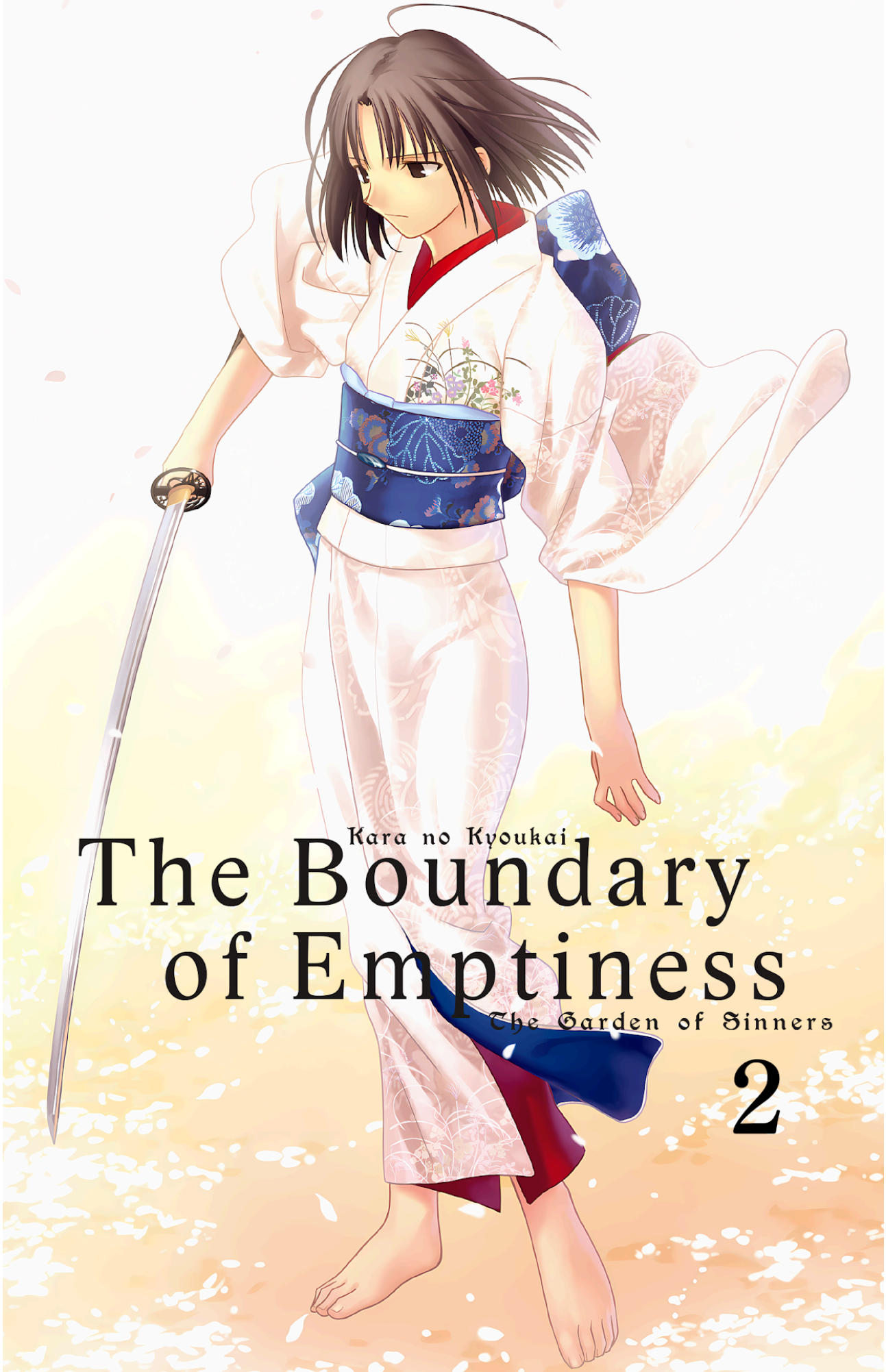
Kinoko Nasu



Kara no Kyoukai

The Boundary of Emptiness

The Garden of Sinners

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The Boundary of Emptiness
Kara no Kyoukai
空の境界
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Epilogue / **The Boundary of Emptiness**

Kinoko Nasu

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5
Paradox Spiral
Paradox Paradigm.

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The spiral shaped tower was bathed in the red sun.

The orange world of sunset was approaching as Aozaki Touko stepped onto the grounds of the apartment complex.

The young woman wore a long leather coat that was the color of a brown lizard's skin, it did not suit her thin frame. More so than clothing, the overcoat resembled armor in its appearance.

The young woman looked up at the apartment complex not more than once as she walked toward the high-rise structure, while carrying an orange-colored bag in one hand. Passing through the green lawn covered garden, she entered the interior of the apartment complex.

As expected, the glass walled lobby was dyed in the red sunlight. The floor, the walls, and the column housing the elevator to the floors above; were all red like the sun.

After brief consideration, the young woman turned around and changed her direction. Not towards the elevator, instead she walked to the east side of the lobby... The apartment complex was divided into two sections, one east and one west.

The young woman turned toward the eastern first floor lobby.

The lobby was wide and rectangular. The stairwell to the second floor led to an area resembling a grand reception hall. Having already entered the interior of the building, the orange color of the sunset gave way to the yellowish interior lighting that illuminated the marble floors.

"I'm surprised. You're in quite a hurry."

The unusually high pitched voice of a man echoed throughout the lobby.

Without answering, Touko lifted her gaze along the gentle slope of the staircase leading to the second floor. Along that slope stood the figure of a man clad in a red coat.

"However, that is quite the joyful surprise. Welcome, to my Gehenna. I welcome you, the pride of all puppeteers."

The Magus, Cornelius Alba, laughed joyfully and theatrically bowed in greeting.

◇

"Gehenna?"

"Indeed. Here is where the burning altar of the Valley of Hinnom reemerges. The burning bodies of the masses, their dying, their suffering, and sense of despair; all gathered here like embers in a furnace. Though unfortunately King Moloch is not here, this place is quite splendid is it not? The rules and laws of the outside world do not apply to the sanctuary of this alien world. The preparations for the opening of this path have been put into motion, Aozaki."

Fluidly the red Magus spoke as he eyed Touko from above.

In contrast to the cheerful young man, the young woman replied in a deadpan voice.

"Such talk is rude to the descendants of those hailing from Agrippa and Judea. With that attitude, you are clearly not aware of the true nature of this place. Hell? That sort of place exists all over the world. If you want to see the slaughter known already to man, then just go to a war zone. If you wanna see death so bad, then just go to a country suffering from a famine. This kind of place is nothing like Hell. This kind of place? It's just a purgatory."

As she said this, the woman placed her bag on the floor.

Thud, the dull sound rang out.

"The souls of those who committed petty sins go here to suffer when they can enter neither Heaven nor Hell. That's this place's true form; just a place for needless suffering. It's a cycle of endless suffering. Such a thing is not a very Magus-like result, at least not for an outsider such as yourself."

Like a stabbing thrust, the words drew a twitch from the red Magus's countenance. As if looking straight through the young man who stood on the staircase, Touko's eyes narrowed as she seemed to focus on the building itself.

"Was it your idea to materialize the Taiji diagram? Just bring Araya out here already. You're not skilled enough and won't gain anything from what happens next. I don't know what it is you want, but what's going on here is nothing a simple man like you would understand. I've told you this much in return for your advice from earlier."

With that said, Touko took a look around her surroundings. And so, Touko ignored the red Magus who stood across from her and searched instead for her true opponent.

The Magus stared fixedly at that her silhouette. As if about to shed tears, his eyes welled up with murderous intent.

"You were always like that!"

The mumbled words leaked out of his lips like liquid.

"That's right. You're always like that. It's just like you to belittle me. It was I who specialized in Runes before you. I was also only one to have the honor of being a Puppeteer. Even so, with that attitude of yours you were able to trick all of those low brow imbeciles. You, who would belittle me, and then make those small minded people act superior to me. If they could just think they would understand. I am the next director of Sponheim you know! I have studied magical arts for over fourteen years! So why would someone like me not be above a mere woman in her twenties?"

At some point his muttering became a cry of anguish that filled the entire lobby.

Despite the change in tone, Touko glanced disinterestedly at the Magus, as if still ignoring him.

“Academic success is not determined by age. Though you are good at dressing up like a youngster, Cornelius. You’re so concerned with your outward appearance that your inner self never changed.”

Though she spoke in a calm voice, her statement came across as the most caustic of insults.

The Magus was in actuality a man in his fifties, though with the face of a youth. His face now contorted with hatred.

“I have not yet stated my objective, have I?”

Trying to assume a calm demeanor, the red Magus resumed his prior line of speaking.

“Personally, I have no interest in Araya’s experiments, and I have no interest in the Swirl of the Root. Chasing after something we don’t even know the existence of is nonsense. To touch the territory of God, you may as well be a Gnostic. I have no desire to go against the grain.”

The man took one step back. As if going up to the second floor, he ascended a few steps.

“It was my own decision to tell you about Ryougi Shiki. Araya cast aside his life in order to grasp Shiki. It was a draw between the both of them. For that reason, this Bounded Field has become mine. However, I have no intention of continuing his experiments. Is it not obvious? You know, Aozaki. I have come to this remote country with the sole purpose of killing you!”

Laughing, with a voice high pitched enough to shatter his vocal cords, the Magus ran up the staircase. As the Magus made his way to the second story, the young woman could only watch him speechlessly.

... The first floor lobby became filled with the evil of the Magus’s malice incarnated.

Then she spoke with greater contempt and hatred than she had previously.

“Is that... slime?”

Aozaki Touko directed such a phrase at the other worldly creatures that started swarming around her. However, the monsters that oozed out of the lobby’s outer walls were not such simple creatures. Cream colored liquid oozed out of the walls and rapidly took form into larger shapes.

The shapes had the forms of both humanoids and beasts. Although the surface of the creatures looked like melting keloid scars, they appeared to constantly reshape themselves in an grotesquely real way. It was as if they were real people and beasts in a state of eternal decay, they looked extremely detailed yet awkward.

“With all your incarnation abilities this is the best you can do? Alba, forget about Magecraft, why not try being a movie director? I bet you could make a monster flick on a pretty tight budget with this creature fare here. Really you would be better suited trying your hand at horror movies than being the director of the abbey you know.”

Surrounded on all sides by the monsters filling the lobby, the young woman muttered these complaints. Certainly, the scene unfolding did look like one from a horror movie. Though it appeared that neither a Crucifix nor a shotgun would be of any effect.

Despite the fact that she was now surrounded by the monsters she called slimes, with only approximately a one meter radius around her to spare, she calmly reached into her inner coat pocket without lifting even an eyebrow.

... She clicked her tongue. Thinking on it Touko regretted passing off her cigarettes to Mikiya. “If this was it, I could have gotten away with Japanese-made ones,” she thought to herself. The young woman had not considered being confronted with such a mundane situation after all. For this, she wanted to smoke a cigarette just to get through it.

“Actually you wouldn’t even be able to be a director; the direction isn’t good enough. If this is the best you can do, you wouldn’t please anybody in the audience. It can’t be helped really. Let me show you an example, Alba. If you want to advertise yourself as a horror show, you had better be able to at least do this.”

Thud, the woman kicked the leather bag still sitting at her toes.

“Go.”

The authoritative command left no room for disagreement.

In response the bag seemed to open on its own. *Bang,* there bag itself seemed to have nothing inside. At the same time, a black form spiraled around the Magus known as Aozaki Touko.

Like a typhoon with a body, in which Touko stood in the eye of the storm, it began to spin around and around with an incredibly fast speed. The storm had an insane force.

Only a few seconds had elapsed before the lobby was completely devoid of the creatures that were just there. There was no trace or shape left of the things that had been spilling into the lobby. Only Aozaki Touko and her bag, now snapped shut, remained. That, and a black cat that now sat at her feet.

“... Wha–”

Alba could only look on at the scene as if in a trance.

The cat was bigger than Touko. Its body was pure black, but didn’t seem to have any thickness. The cat’s fur appeared like shadows. Rather than a cat, the form seemed merely to hold the silhouette of a cat, and face that resembled the Egyptian hieroglyphs.

“What is that..?”

The man looked down from the second floor at the cat. His gaze met with the cat’s painting like eyes. Even though it was missing a mouth, the cat seemed to smile back at him.

As if waking up from a nightmare, Alba gulped.

Touko didn’t say anything.

Bzz, bzz, bzz, bzz, bzz, from somewhere there rang a buzzing noise.

“This isn’t what we discussed! Was it a lie that your familiar was defeated by your sister!?”

Alba could no longer remain quiet and let out a shout.

With hardly a shrug, Touko gave only a half reply of, “Who knows?” then shifted her gaze back to the black cat.

“I guess I made you eat something nasty. However, your next meal will hopefully taste a little better. Not just a lump of ether, but an actual human made of flesh. You already have plenty of spiritual reserves. And don’t hold back just because he’s a former classmate of mine. I’ve been properly training you every day haven’t I? How to devour your enemies.”Suddenly the black cat sprang forth.

As if sliding across the marble floor, the black cat sprinted toward the staircase.

... Yet the cat’s feet did not move. The silhouette of the cat remained in a sitting position while only the eyes seemed to shift as the shape continued forward toward the man in the red coat. At this speed it would not have taken ten seconds to reach the Alba on second floor landing from where Touko stood in the lobby.

However, Alba was no ordinary human who would allow this.

He was a Magus.

“Go away the shadow. It is impossible to touch the things which are not visible. Forget the darkness. It is impossible to see the things which are not touched.

“The question is prohibited. The answer is simple.

“I have the flame in the left hand. And I have everything in the right hand–”

Alba tried to chant the spell calmly, but with as much speed as he could.

–In Magecraft, a spell is nothing more than an individual’s self-suggestion.

Take, for example, Magecraft to summon wind. Similar to a weapon, a spell’s power and performance was determined from the beginning. No matter what Magus used it, a spell’s power would not change. Only the composition of the chant changed.

The chanting of a spell was used to manifest the Magecraft engraved in one’s body; the nature of the Magus strongly reflected in the chant’s content. This was because the specifics of a chant depended on the preferences of each Magus, as long as the chant contained the essential meaning and predetermined keywords necessary the Magecraft would manifest.

Magi who were exaggerated and theatrical, and who tended to be self-indulgent, tended to have long chants. However, it was also true that the longer the meaning was, the greater the spell’s power was. The stronger the self-suggestion one cast on themselves, the greater the ability that was drawn out from oneself.

From that perspective, Alba’s chanting was excellent. It wasn’t particularly long, stuck to the necessary rhythm, incorporated words to uplift his own spirit, and required no more than two seconds to articulate.

Touko was impressed by this fact.

The young man Alba used to like chanting incantations that were unnecessarily long and overly elaborate, but he had undoubtedly grown over the past few years. The shape and

speed of his chant, as well as the way he connected his circuits to affect the material world, were surprisingly skilled.

If his chant was simply Magecraft to destroy objects, it was undoubtedly the work of a first-rate Magus.

“I am the order. Therefore, you will be defeated securely−−!”

Alba stuck out one arm.

The moment the black cat seemed to reach the first step of the staircase, the air trembled slightly, and the stairs burst into flames.

A sea of blue flames engulfed the stairs, like a mirage rising up from the ground.

In only a few seconds, the flames engulfed the atrium all the way up to the second floor.

It was as if a volcanic geyser had erupted. The sea of flames, that seemed to consume all oxygen in the lobby, incinerated the black cat. This much was certain. The heat of the flames which exceeded a temperature of one thousand degrees Celsius would have melted the bodies of any creature like butter and evaporated their mass into the atmosphere. There wouldn’t even have been a split second for it to have gone through the liquification process.

And yet, Alba saw it.

As the flames burned out, all of the sudden, the bizarre shape of the black cat suddenly appeared.

“That’s impossible!”

His blue eyes stared fixedly at the stairs.

The black cat sat licking at its thin black body in disappointment before shifting its gaze to the Magus in the red coat.

The black monster resumed its dash.

Alba wasted no time trying to determine what the cat was.

“I order you to repeat...!”

With cutting sharpness, Alba repeated his spell.

The stairs erupted into flames, however this time the cat did not stop. As if used to the flames, the cat continued in a straight line toward the Magus.

“Repeat!”

The sea of flames erupted again, then disappeared.

The cat had already arrived at the top of the stairs.

“Repeat!”

The fourth iteration of flames ended meaninglessly.

The black cat arrived at the second floor landing and opened its jaws wide as it drew near to Alba.The human-sized cat’s body opened from its feet. The top of its head opened as if on a hinge, like the lid of a treasure chest.

The inside of the cat, which should have been smooth and featureless, was instead filled with the monsters it had swallowed and what looked like sludge was stuck to its insides.

Finally, Alba became aware of the reality before him. What resembled a cat was in fact a living being that was nothing more than a giant mouth in the shape of a cat.

“Repeat−−!”

He chanted this last spell with the fear someone staring directly into the jaws of death would have.

But before he could finish his last spell, the cat’s mouth, like the jaws of a shark, slammed shut around the Magus. Alba lost consciousness as his red coated figure was encompassed by the round sphere-like form.

◇

“, Ouken”

Suddenly, a short rhyme was sung out.

The cat completely stopped its devouring of Alba’s body.

Even Touko, who had been watching from the sidelines, reacted to the voice.

From behind Alba there was a man.

He bore a facial expression that was filled with anguish and wore a black overcoat.

Though no trace had given away his existence prior, he appeared so naturally it was like he had been there the entire time.

The man in black grabbed Alba with both hands and effortlessly pulled him from the jaws of the cat and dumped him on the floor. The cat was caught in one of the three Bounded Fields that the man in black was carrying with him and thus could no longer move.

The man turned towards the young woman. The air within the lobby shifted instantaneously. It was as if the atmosphere itself had frozen.

The relaxed feeling of just a short while ago vanished completely. The apartment complex itself seemed to tense up with the return of its true master.

“It’s been a while, Aozaki.”

“Yeah, I’m sure we didn’t want to see each other though.”

The first floor and the second floor became the divide between heaven and earth. Touko faced the mastermind known as Araya Souren.

“It seems Alba took on more than he could handle. Originally this was supposed to be settled without your knowledge, but there’s no helping it. I prepared the bodies of sixty-four people on my own. Your presence in this town may have been a coincidence, but it was inevitable.”

“I don’t know who drew whom here, but yes, it would appear so. Rather than a coincidence, perhaps it’s an unknown mystery. The term ‘coincidence’ is employed to conceal laws we cannot yet comprehend.”

Touko gave this answer as she withdrew closer to the wall.

This opponent was of a completely different level than Alba. Their abilities might be comparable in theory, but within this building Araya Souren held supremacy over everyone. Seeking protection by putting her back against the wall, she was conscious only of what was in front of her. After all, to focus on anything else would risk leaving an opening.

“So, why did you set up this apartment complex? Surely it’s not just some box given form to embody an uncertainty, like being alive and dead at the same time. The idea of crafting a world that concludes within a day, to collect the explosion of souls at the moment of death, was deemed ineffective hundreds of years ago. Even if you gather hundreds of deaths, you won’t reach your goal.”

“Of course, but there are truths beyond your understanding. Certainly, I have been pursuing the sheer number of deaths. Through experiencing the tens of thousands of deaths of different humans, I believed that the Root could be reached through finding a soul’s diffusion that was connected to it. However, that alone cannot reach the beginning of all things. Instead I arrived only at that specific human’s ‘Origin.’ I wasn’t able to arrive at the apex of that holistic thing which underlies everything else.

“What’s important is not the quantity of death. It is the quality of death. Tracing back to the source, the forms a death can take can be categorized into broader distinctions. Dissecting the possibilities of death into every possible route, I arrived at the sixty-four possibilities present here. Here I have gathered the people who shoulder those varieties of death. Therefore, this place is a microcosm of the whole world. By experiencing their suffering, I am able to comprehend their suffering. I am able to simplify the eight divine signs into four simple forms and arrive at Ryougi, the Two Forms.”

“Hmph. Is being unified as one really so desirable, Araya? Light and darkness were not divided to oppose each other, but because they are the attributes that encompass the greatest number of things. Everything that exists alone is inherently lonely. That is why it tries to divide into many. You just can’t accept that. You study the deaths of countless humans, carefully research their lives, and accumulate that knowledge as your own. Even if I were to die, you would likely store everything about the life and death of Aozaki Touko in some corner of your brain.

“You’re free to examine the value of humanity all you like, but performing such acts is the role of Yama, the god of the underworld. A human like you can only be a hell that continues to inhale death.”

“Then let it be so. Whether heaven or hell, so long as I am closer to that which lies beneath, it matters not.”

There was no hesitation behind Araya’s words. His strong will had concluded that self-confidence was the only thing in this world.

Touko thought to herself.

This building endlessly repeated the spiral of humanity's everyday life, and it contained within it the archetypes of every possible death a human could experience swirling around. The record-keeping that Araya Souren's physical body had been carrying out until now had been inherited by this building. This place was him. It was the very consciousness of Araya Souren.

"..... In other words, I'm inside his body right now."

Muttering this, Touko observed the atmosphere within the lobby. The tense air that existed was not benefiting Araya. Rather the hostile voices of the residents that were killed within the building's premises seemed to linger in opposition to him.

The amount of resentment that even she could feel was enough to be crushed. But Araya continued to endure it, even as it grew. To borrow his words, he was likely increasing quality, not quantity. After all, hundreds of repeated deaths ultimately represented only one type of death.

Deaths of love; family, lovers, mothers, fathers, children.

Deaths of hatred; family, lovers, friends, seniors, strangers.

Various ways of dying for various reasons.

The same endings repeated everyday, becoming more certain.

Death, was becoming thicker and thicker here.

This building was a spell. An altar meant to solidify the consciousness of Araya Souren. To perform high-level Magecraft, one must not solely rely on chants or their own magical energy, but must also sacrifice life and utilize the power in the land itself.

By constructing a temple in the modern era, Araya was seeking to perform even more advanced Magecraft. No, this is no longer mere Magecraft. A mystery of this scale, employing such an otherworldly domain, had already surpassed the bounds of Magecraft.

This was, yes, it was a mystery in an area that was impossible according to the common sense of the present world.

A forbidden power beyond human reach, known as Magic.

"Will this open a path to the Root? But how? Even if you prove that you're not a Magus by refraining from creating any Bounded Fields, the will of humanity can't be deceived. A Bounded Field created with modern techniques might fool other Magi, but not that. It's true that this building would be able to open a path. That's because of the Taiji after all, it could definitely make a hole. Through such a hole a guardian of humanity would come through. We could never be able to be a match for such a figure."

"The Counter Force is already at work. There's the fact you're present in this town. There was the man who committed theft here by chance, as if possessed by something for no reason. There was the woman who was the victim of a random murder in this area, although no such incidents had occurred here before. The Counter Force has acted three times even though I have restrained myself to this extent. But that's enough. I'm not able to draw any closer to the Root. I will not let the past failures be for naught. I have tried to open a path undetected by the Counter Force, but that thing's eyes can't be fooled. Even if I have

the means to defeat the Counter Force itself, it will just appear with even more power. There is only one conclusion, I lacked the talent."

For the first time, his voice contained a rhyme that sounded like emotion was present.

The man clad in black directed his gaze at the Magus who stood below him.

"The Counter Force is extremely thorough in preventing the path from being reached. This is because it's a power that humans should not possess, an act that serves as the means to regress into nothingness.

"Once an individual human is complete, the meaning of their existence will disappear. At long last, one could escape from this burning house of worldly desires. And yet the masses of humans unconsciously refuse to achieve completion simply because they want to live. All humans, the moment they think of themselves as 'human,' become less than beasts . Though they live in order to achieve completion, they refuse completion for the sake of survival. Humanity's beginnings have always been a paradox.

"So then, why is it that those who have managed to reach the Root exist? The answer is simple. There are simply people who are able to reach it. No matter what wisdom you learn, Magecraft is ultimately only an acquired skill that comes later. That's what talent is. You're born with it or you aren't. It's simply the difference of whether one has been chosen or not.

"Humans from the time they're born are already connected to the Root. Humans have become increasingly complex, diversified, and distanced from the Root; rarely is anyone born with a connection to the Root. There are colorless souls born that are connected to 「 」. Such beings are likely the only ones who can reach the Root. So, all you have to do is find them, and it took me ten years to find one."

"I see. So that's how you came to the conclusion to destroy Ryougi Shiki."

The young woman's eyes narrowed.

Ryougi Shiki. The Ryougi family had, over the years, dedicated themselves to creating a human with the utmost versatility; they sought to produce an empty vessel. To be empty is to be 「 」. Without realizing the danger of what they were doing, they created a body like Shiki's – one that is connected to 「 」.

"So that's why you used Fujou Kirie and Asagami Fujino? If you had acted directly the Counter Force would have noticed. You needed to destroy Shiki in an indirect manner, ensuring your own existence wouldn't be detected. Isn't that right? By pitting her against murderers with a concept completely opposite to Shiki's, you made her confront her own essence. It's quicker to persuade someone of something by letting them experience it, than it is by teaching them. And so here we are, what exactly is it that you want, Araya? Is it to have Shiki and SHIKI consume each other and become empty? Or are you just fixated on encountering Ryougi Shiki?"

"... Two years ago it was to manifest Ryougi Shiki. However, the present situation is different. The conclusion has already appeared. Shiki does not need that corporeal body. I will take that body that is connected to the Root."

In response to his bold statement Touko opened her mouth, “Heh.” In that moment, she understood what Araya was telling her, and her mind went blank.

“Don’t tell me, you intend to transfer your brain into Shiki’s body?”

Araya gave no reply to Touko’s unbelieving tone. He looked at her as if there was no need for him to say anything, Touko muttered, “What a nasty guy.”

“Well, the fact you’re in that body means that Shiki is safe for now. Just to be certain, do you intend to give Shiki back?”

“If that’s what you desire then do as you please.”

“Hah. So we have no choice but to fight in the end huh? Geez, I’m really not somebody who’s predisposed to combat. It’s really just too much trouble.”

“Then allow me to ask you something as well as well, Aozaki. Would you consider collaborating?”

Even saying so, Araya conveyed a threatening presence through his hostile glare.

Touko answered. Peering back at him with amber colored eyes, she showed him an absolute no.

“... I see. How unfortunate. I had a fair opinion of you. There was a time when we competed together to reach the Root. Truthfully, I actually liked you.”

Clack, Araya took a step forward. As he drew closer to the staircase leading to the first floor.

“At the academy, you alone stood apart from the crowd. I aimed for the archetype of the soul. You aimed for for the archetype of the body. I was certain you would reach it first. However, you gave up. Why? Even now, you’ve abandoned the fact that you’re a Magus. For what purpose did you study? For what purpose you seek power? For what purpose did you journey, and what did you hope to save?”

The black Magus bellowed.

Quietly, without any change in attitude, his eyes burned with resentment.

In response to that, Touko answered.

“There was no reason in particular. I was tired of creating paradoxes the more I developed my theories. We were straying from what we were studying the more we learned. The Root is the same way. You can’t get close to it unless you’re ignorant, but if you remain ignorant it’s meaningless because you can’t recognize it. It’s the same for you. I accepted it and you chose not accept it. That’s all there is, but it’s an important difference.”

Araya accepted the sad confession without so much as twitching his brow.

Their gazes collided simultaneously.

Touko had said to Araya. The true character of Magi, was the paradox that the smarter they became the more foolish they also became.

Araya had said to Touko. The true character of Magi, was the more they learned, the higher they ascended.

“You’ve degenerated.”

Full of emotion, the man briefly spoke.

“Then what are you aiming for? For what purpose do you stand there?”

“... Let’s see. I don’t have much of a reason to be here. I’m not particularly interested in Shiki either. That body of hers is full of black boxes, so I couldn’t even create something similar.”

Indeed, Touko had no particular reason. Perhaps without fully intending too, she was subtly being pushed forward by the mysterious thing known as the Counter Force.

However, even if that were the case it shouldn’t matter. She had accepted the current life she was living as Aozaki Touko. She understood that this environment, built upon many miracles and coincidences, was unique; never to be reconstructed again. Even if, like this paradoxical building, one attempted to repeat it from the beginning, it could never become the exact same life she had now.

And so, if she could protect it, she simply thought she would.

“Really, how indulgent. I’m getting weaker and weaker. Araya, my ideal of a transcendent being is a hermit. Someone with extraordinary power and knowledge, but does nothing with them and quietly dwells in a remote mountain. I’ve always admired that way of living. But when I look back, I can’t return to such a life. I’ve been filled with too many things inside, and the day that I can reach that ideal will never come. I’ve thought that for a long time now.

“You know, Araya. Magi live fast. For what reason? If for themselves, then they would be isolated from the outside world. So why do they engage with it? Why are they dependent on on it? What do they hope to accomplish with their power? Are they trying to save something? If so, they should abandon being Magi and become kings instead.

“You say that people are filthy and desperate to live, yet you yourself can’t even live like that. Knowing it’s ugly, knowing it’s worthless, you still cannot bear to live accepting that. You have to believe you’re special. You have to carry the pride that only you can save this decaying world; otherwise, you cannot continue to exist. Yeah, I was the same. But there’s no meaning in doing that. Admit it Araya, we are weaker than anyone else, that’s why we chose to become transcendent beings like magicians.”

The Magus did not answer.

He took one step, and then another, toward the staircase.

“... I have already obtained a path to the Root. My wish will come true with a few more steps. Anything that stands in my way, will be regarded as the Counter Force. Aozaki. In the end, you too are a mere human.”

The pressure was so great that it would make one worry if space would solidify and distort from the Magus’s murderous intent.

Through this, the young woman looked at her former compatriot from afar. The long debate, meant to bridge the years of separation, ended here.

At last, as the Magus named Aozaki Touko, she posed her final questions to Araya Souren:

“Araya, what do you seek?”

"True Wisdom."

"Araya, where do you seek it?"

"Only within myself."

Without hesitation the man answered.

The footsteps stopped at the entrance to the stairs.

The two began to act with the intent of eliminating the other's existence from this world.

◇

From beneath his black coat, Araya raised one arm into the air.

Slowly, his left arm became level with his shoulder. His palm was opened limply, resembling a gesture for stopping someone from a distance.

He faced his opponent raising but one hand.

This was Araya Souren's combat stance.

On the other side, Aozaki Touko just looked up at the figure of the black Magus. With her bag at her feet, she carefully watched her enemy. Her black cat familiar was at this moment held frozen in place behind Araya, completely immobilized.

Touko had already seen through the fact that Araya had constructed three Bounded Fields arrayed around himself.

Fugu, Kongou, Dakatsu, Taiten, Chiyougiyou, Ouken.

Threads of the Magus's web stretched across the ground and space, between planes and dimensions. Any living thing, touching those circular lines would would have its power stopped.

... Normally, a Bounded Field was a stationary construct; a boundary that protected something immovable. Instead the enemy was performing something monstrous, carrying them with him; centered around himself as he moved. For that reason they were visible but gave off no detectable presence. In close-quarters combat, Araya Souren could be said to be invincible.

However, conversely, that was all Araya had.

To begin with, neither Touko no Araya had mastered the kind of Magecraft that acted directly upon the material world to cause destruction, as Alba had.

The Rune Magecraft that Touko had mastered certainly had offensive capabilities. Runes are a form of Magecraft that makes the meaning of the engraved letters a reality by carving a powerful seal into a target. If Touko were to directly inscribe the Rune of Sowilō, which represented fire, onto Araya's body, then his body would burst into flames.

... The weak point, however, was that the runes had to be inscribed directly, overlapping letters from a distance wouldn't work on Magi. Indirect magical energy would be repelled by a Magus who had direct magical energy coursing through their body.

Since their academy days, neither had shown much interest in offensive Magecraft. Touko was interested in making puppets, while Araya was only interested in the collection of death.

Therefore, the way that Araya had to eliminate Touko was to engage her in hand-to-hand combat after closing the distance. Araya was a man who had survived turbulent times. In terms of fighting with his body as a weapon, someone from the modern era couldn't hope to oppose him.

Knowing this, Touko waited for him to approach. She had no choice but to wait.

She was aiming to strike when Araya descended the stairs and stepped into the first floor lobby.

And yet, the black Magus stopped at the entrance of the stairs, and held his arm out in front of him moving slightly

"... Silence."

A short murmur.

The Magus's open palm clenched tightly.

It was a motion like crushing something in the palm of one's hand.

Simultaneously, Touko's body shook with a violent impact. Her coat, which blocked all forms of magical interference with her Magic Circuits, was shredded to pieces and fell to the floor.

There had been an attack, it was an invisible impact.

Struck equally across her body from every direction, she then fell to her knees.

Touko instantly understood what the impact had been.

... Araya crushed the space in which Touko had been standing. It was as if her entire body had been pressed down upon.

Touko's tongue was silenced in disbelief. She had no knowledge of what Magecraft enabled such a small gesture to manipulate space.

"... I got hit. Dammit, how many ribs did he break?"

Swallowing the blood pooling in her mouth, Touko assessed the damage to her body. Unlike Shiki, Touko had no physical training, she had no way of knowing how many of her bones were broken. All she understood was the fact that her coat had saved her.

If she were to take a hit like that again, she would certainly be crushed.

"Go!"

That being the case, she wouldn't hold back either.

Suddenly, the black cat, which had been frozen until now, began once again to move. The paralysis up to now had been an act. The cat pounced at Araya, who believing he was safe, had turned his back on the cat.

"What?"

With a faint look of surprise, Araya turned around in an instant. Without hesitation, he spread his outstretched palm and clenched it tightly once more.

Onn, a sound like a tremor could be heard.

Touko saw it, the space in front of Araya was collapsing further and further inward. The black cat leaped upward before it could be compressed. As if gravity had reversed, the cat landed on the ceiling and then glared at the Magus below.

"That's enough."

From beneath the black coat another arm extended, the fist tightly clenching.

The black cat and the spot on the ceiling on which it rested were crushed.

Bang, one corner of the ceiling caved in and the black cat was crushed, compressed beyond recognition, and disappeared.

"Your puppet is gone now. 'A Magus doesn't need to be a strong fighter, they just need to create the strongest thing with their skills' ... Those were your words during our days at the academy. Indeed, that is the case. A Puppeteer has lost the instant their puppet loses."

Araya said so as he spread his palm open, once again turning toward Touko.

The young woman seemed displeased to hear this.

"Yeah, I still haven't changed my theory. But this is amazing. I forgot, this place is inside your body isn't it? Not just the building, but even the air itself is infused with your magical energy. It that's the case then you can easily crush the space within. So I've already walked into a large spell. Hmph, if you were so prepared, why were you cornered and brought to the brink of death by Shiki?"

"... Capturing someone alive is troublesome. I would've crushed her if I had gone full force. But this time will be different. I will use all my strength against someone I must kill."

"So, you wanted Shiki's body that badly? She's your only path forward after all. It must have been very difficult to nearly kill her without dying. Just hope that doesn't turn out to be a bad choice."

Straightening her slumped posture, Touko slowly leaned her back against the wall.

"I told Alba this, but you don't understand horror either. Do you know the three conditions to terrify someone? One, the monster can't speak. Two, the monster has to be unidentifiable. Three, it's meaningless if the monster can die."

"——!"

Araya spun around.

The black cat he had crushed just moments before was now perched on the ceiling, as if nothing had happened.

"Shuku!"

The man tightly clenched his palm directed toward the ceiling.

Thud, the space was suddenly compressed.

Shaking within that distortion, the black cat leaped down toward the Magus, opening its mouth with a *snap*. Before the black Magus could evade he was nearly swallowed whole.

"Gah–" He let out a dull cry that sounded like it was in its death throes.

Squelch, a dull noise rang out.

It was different from the time with Shiki. Before the Magus could fight back, he had lost most of his body.

Thud, only the Magus's face and shoulders remained, falling to the ground. Even in death his face was still full of anguish, as the piece of human flesh tumbled down the rest of the stairs.

After calmly observing the scene, Aozaki Touko briefly muttered.

"If you're going to kill, do it in one shot. That's how you pull off a surprise attack."

And with that, Touko stepped away from the wall and continued walking. No, she had just started to walk.

––Boom.

There was a sound. She thought it was a dull sound, it seemed like it was someone else's concern.

Blood spilled from her mouth. With nowhere else to go, the blood that was expelled from her organs could no longer be contained and was spat out.

With her vision beginning to get cloudy, she lowered her gaze and saw an arm.

Someone's arm protruded from her chest.

"What a bizarre object," Touko thought. A man's thick arm extended from her chest holding a plump heart in its grasp. Surely, it was her own heart.

She quickly came to the conclusion.

The enemy had appeared behind her and pierced her body; she was going to die.

"Kill in one shot, huh? I see, that was a good lesson."

The voice came from behind her.

The heavy voice carried a mix of sadness, grief, and hatred.

It was unmistakably the voice of the Magus, Araya Souren.

"That was... a puppet?"

As Touko spoke she spat out more blood.

The Magus who had suddenly appeared behind her replied, "Of course."

"I may not be as skilled as you in making puppets, but I too have inherited the techniques of my predecessors. You know the name of the esoteric priest who crafted human figures, don't you?"

Piercing through Touko's body, the Magus continued, staring at the heart he had removed.

"But you are very much real. There's no mistaking the rage in this heart. Beautiful. Such splendid form. It's a shame to crush it, but there's no other choice."

Squelch, Araya crushed her heart with the cruelty of slamming a plastic bag filled with water into the ground.

"I've also seen through the mechanisms of your familiar. That creature didn't come out of the bag. It was an image projected by the bag, wasn't it?"

As Araya glared at the bag, it shattered into pieces. Inside the shattered bag was a machine equipped with a lens and film. It was a was film projector making a whirring sound, *whirr, whirr*.

"A shadow-puppet familiar is it? I see. That would explain why it could nullify all attacks. Even if the ether body projected into the atmosphere was destroyed, as long as the projector, the true body, kept running, it could revive endlessly... It's a shame, I have to remove such a genius."

Touko did not answer his muttering. Before she disappeared, she began to spin her own question.

"... Araya, let me ask you the same question as before. As a Magus, what do you wish for...?"

"I do not wish for anything."

It was the same question and the same answer as they had exchanged in the past.

Touko let out a dry laugh. Her bloodstained lips were sublimely beautiful.

To not wish for anything. In the past, it was not Touko who had asked this question. Their mentor had gathered his disciples to pose the question to each of them. Each of the gathered disciples spoke of the completion of their Magecraft theories, and the glory they each sought. Yet only Araya responded differently: "I do not wish for anything." The others laughed at Araya, calling him a man without ambition, however Touko was the only one who couldn't.

... What Touko felt at that moment instead was fear.

The Magus had not answered that he had no hope.

He desired nothing at all. He didn't wish for anything in this world, not even his own existence. Araya Souren desired a world of perfect death.

That was why he wished for nothing.

A man who hated humanity to such an extent that he created a shell to isolate himself. You could call it detachment. This man had renounced even trivial happiness and instead hated the paradox that was humanity.

"Araya... let me leave you with one last curse."

"Speak it... and hurry, you have few remaining seconds.

Touko cursed inwardly. "The nerve of him, saying such a thing after killing me himself." Still, he wasn't wrong. The only part of her body that she could move was her lips.

"... By trying to touch the Akashic Record, the Counter Force begins to move. This is because, if someone who hates humanity, like you, became omnipotent, it increases the chances of the world ending. There are two different types of Counter Force. One is the collective unconscious of humanity, their instinctual drive to preserve their own world. The other is the instinct of the world itself... Both types have the same purpose, but their natures are subtly different. The instinct of the world moves to prevent someone from accessing the Akashic Records because humanity currently rules the Earth. The collapse of human civilization could directly lead to the '*end of growth,*' the death of this celestial body. Therefore, the savior created by the will of the world stands alongside heroes to prevent the collapse of the human world."

"What of it?"

Araya raised an eyebrow as he heard Touko confirm that which he already knew.

Her breathing became ragged yet she continued on clearly.

"In other words, the Counter Force born from the Gaia type treats the planet itself as a living organism, it and the Counter Force born from humanity are fundamentally different... So, Araya, which one have you hated as your lifelong enemy?"

"Hmm," the Magus pondered the question for a moment.

Now that it was pointed out, he realized there was some merit to the distinction. He thought about the matter, contemplating for the first time... Yes. It was something that he, who had studied mysteries for so long, too long, had never even considered.

The Gaia type Counter Force; it sought to preserve the world but concluded that it didn't matter what happened to humans, as long as the world was safe. In contrast, the Counter Force produced by humanity's collective will sought to preserve the human world, even if that meant consuming the planet itself.

... The answer was clearly the latter.

"It goes without saying. The adversary I've faced so many times, the thing Araya has deemed as his enemy, is the incorrigible nature of humanity itself."

"That Counter Force is the consciousness of every human being on earth. Do you really think you can win against the will of nearly six billion people all by yourself?"

"I will win."

Without any hesitation and without exaggeration, the Magus replied immediately.

A living hell that had collected the deaths of many people. The Magus had imagined each person's history and the future that should have existed beyond their actual end. No matter how meaningless the death was, he lived as if it were his own.

Touko thought it was an extreme ego, forged like steel, that would win; even if it meant making all of humanity into his enemy.

Araya Souren possessed that. Whether it was true or not wasn't really an issue, what mattered was his unshakable will to assert it as truth. When he asked this question, Araya Souren must have clearly imagined having to confront the dignity of six billion people; one by one.

Araya had answered that he would win. He imagined the struggle as if it were reality, even after realizing how painful it would be

This strength of will was the strength of the Magus, but within it was his greatest pitfall.

A Magus of his caliber should have noticed this first, but it was the biggest paradox and deterrent that he had never been told about.

“It’s a pity Araya.”

“What–?”

Araya spoke to her, but she had already ceased all vital activity. The body of Aozaki Touko no longer functioned as a living person.

All that remained to die was her brain. Without the flow of blood, her brain would soon deteriorate. The knowledge and techniques she had accumulated would be completely lost.

The black Magus pulled his arm out of Touko’s body and placed his palm on her head. Grabbing her face with an iron grip, he broke her neck with a *snap*. After that, he slowly ripped the head off of the body and discarded the headless corpse on the floor.

Holding the severed head of his former comrade in one hand, the Magus turned on his heel.

The place he had emerged from, behind Touko, was the wall of the apartment complex. The very wall Touko had stepped away from, when she was certain of her victory, was where Araya Souren had appeared.

Even though Touko herself had said it, she had failed to understand the meaning to the very end.

This apartment complex was Araya Souren himself. The walls, the floors, common sense regarding buildings did not apply to Araya.

He could exist in any location within the apartment complex and could manipulate any space within at will. This place was an alien world that embodied Araya Souren. Within the confines of this property, he could instantaneously teleport anywhere.

The black Magus’s real body sank into the wall of the apartment as if sinking into water and disappeared.

(14/)

...

What came to mind was only a vast, burned wasteland.

No matter how many steps I took, there were only endless corpses.

The gravel spread along the riverbank was not stone but fragments of bone. The stench of death carried by the wind seeked to fill all of existence; never ceasing.

It was an age of conflict.

A time before weapons were invented, where those who lived only today would fight with their own hands.

Wherever I went, there was conflict, and the bodies of the dead were, without exception, discarded in cruel abandon.

The weak in villages were commonly slaughtered by flocks of strong humans. It didn't matter who killed whom. On the battlefield, good and evil held no meaning. All that mattered was how many had died and how many could not be saved.

When word of a conflict had arisen, I would go to that land.

When news of a rebellion had spread, I would travel to that village.

There were instances where I had made it in time, and instances where I had not. But either way, the result was always the same. The outcome was nothing but a mountain of corpses.

Humans were, in the end, creatures doomed to die.

A man cried out in anguish as he had died.

A starving child had died with a smile.

A mother prayed for her children to live, even just until tomorrow, as she had died.

Death rushed irrationally toward everyone.

Neither the good deeds one had accumulated nor the life one had led held any meaning before it.

Human life is helpless. Life is all about struggling desperately, resisting all one can, only to die miserably.

Even so, I traveled across the land, seeking to save them.

But all I saw was an endless, burned wasteland.

They cannot be saved. Humans cannot be saved. Even religion cannot save anyone.

Because, people were not something to be saved, but something to be ended.

Despair conceals despair, obscuring yesterday's lament with a new lament today. The cycle of endless death made me I realize how small and insignificant I am.

———As a human being, I cannot save anyone.

If I cannot save them, then at the very least, I will ensure their deaths are clearly recorded.

I will preserve the life they lived up until now and the life they might have had.

I will keep their suffering alive.

The proof of life lies not in how much one rejoiced.

The meaning of life is found in how much one suffered.

And thus.

I began collecting deaths.

...

He awoke to the sound of steam and bubbling water.

In total darkness, Araya Souren silently stood surrounded by the apartment complex's residents. He had been dreaming for a little bit.

"... I had a dream? I have seen the regrets of others before, but this is the first time I had seen my own."

The Magus spoke to himself.

No, he was not alone. Beside him sat a glass container, the size of a birdcage. Inside the large glass vessel was a liquid, and a human head floating in it. The head drifting gently as if asleep, its eyes were closed. Needless to say, it was the head of Aozaki Touko.

Hiss, the sound of the steam echoed.

In the center of the room, a glowing metal plate provided the only light. The red-hot metal illuminated the Magus's laboratory.

The Magus waited quietly.

The combined efforts of Ryougi Shiki and Aozaki Touko had completely destroyed the body he had been using up to this point. The body that was now active was just a spare he had prepared. It would take time for him to fully adapt to it. Even though he would soon transfer to the body of Ryougi Shiki, any misstep with this body he was not used to could lead to irreparable failure.

Araya simply waited. Already, nothing could threaten him anymore.

"Araya!"

Suddenly, another Magus appeared.

A perturbed Magus in a red coat who was clearly dissatisfied approached Araya.

"What are you relaxing for? There's still work to be done! You need to take action immediately!"

"... It's finished. There's no need to interfere with Aozaki's workshop. The same goes for Enjou Tomoe. He is powerless to do anything, you of all people should know that."

"... That's true. I guess he's near his limit. Very well, I shall concede that external matters are no longer an issue. But what about Ryougi Shiki? Isn't she merely unconscious right now? It's obvious that when she wakes, she'll try to escape. I have no desire to waste further time and energy dealing with her. I do not want to stop some girl from running away, let alone constantly keeping an eye on her."

"There is no need for concern. I have not imprisoned her in a room within the apartment complex. I have thrown her into Mugen, the infinite void, that connects the material world to the otherworld. The primary purpose of this distorted alien world was to create a closed loop. By no means, no matter the method or the impact, could one escape from the darkness of Mugen. Even if Ryougi Shiki were to awaken, there is nothing she could do. Monitoring her is unnecessary. Besides, given her injuries, even standing would be difficult. Even if she wakes, her body will be incapable of moving properly."

Araya continued speaking with the same expression of anguish, the red Magus shut his mouth in dissatisfaction.

"... Well, whatever then. I've no real interest in Ryougi Shiki. The reason I went along with your invitation was for a different reason entirely."

As he said so, the red Magus glanced in a different direction. He eyed the glass container housing Touko's head, sitting on a table.

"This isn't what you promised, Araya. You told me that you'd let me kill Aozaki. Was that a lie?"

"I gave you the opportunity, but you failed. It couldn't be helped that I had to kill Aozaki."

"Kill her? Don't make me laugh. She's still alive. For someone like you to leave her alive; it's a bit soft, wouldn't you say?"

At the Magus's pointed accusation, Araya had let out a thoughtful "Hm."

It was true, Aozaki Touko was not yet completely dead. The functions of her brain still carried on, even though she could not speak or even think. If that state could be considered alive, then yes, she probably was still alive.

"Don't make a mistake, Araya. Aozaki is a fox who was even called a dirty red. Even if all that's left is her head, she'll fight back if she gets the chance. We must kill her for sure."

"Fool. You said something you shouldn't have, Cornelius."

"What?"

The red Magus hesitated. Ignoring him, Araya reached for the glass container.

"Take it. This thing is yours. I won't complain no matter what you do with it."

Araya readily handed over Touko's head to the red-coated Magus.

Holding the large birdcage shaped container in both hands, the red Magus stared at it in bewilderment until a sinister smile crossed his face.

“I’ll certainly accept this. This is mine now. You don’t mind what I do with it, right Araya?”

“Do what you want. Your fate is determined no matter what you do anyway.”

Araya spoke quietly, yet his words did not reach the red Magus.

With a joyous chuckle, the red Magus left the room with a satisfied gait.

/13 (Paradox Spiral, 6)

Clack, clack, clank clank.

... The headache became more intense. Throughout my body the pain sharpened, as if bolts had been driven into me.

I hugged my knees and bore the pain while curling into a ball. I was unable to focus my thoughts and my teeth were clattering. I kept repeating "dammit," to myself, while glaring aimlessly at the wall.

How long had it been since then?

As Ryougi Shiki had been defeated by Araya and I stood there doing nothing. Araya had been standing even as he died. Of course, his chest and neck had both been stabbed with a knife, and the stab in his neck had been buried up to the hilt. It would be strange if he were still alive.

But Araya had been trying to come back to life. The knife that had been lodged in his neck had begun to slowly move outward. It wasn't until I noticed his muscles pushing the blade out that I realized what was happening. The knife had fallen to the floor with a clang. Araya's stopped breathing had then restarted.

It was the sound of the falling knife that finally got my thoughts working again. Crawling on all fours, I had scrambled over to the knife and grabbed it tightly with both hands. When I looked up, the newly resurrected Araya was glaring at me.

I think I probably screamed. Araya's appearance was absolutely terrifying. I was unable to bring myself to confront him, even though he was Ryougi's enemy I frantically ran away.

I didn't think I could escape, but running was all I could do.

I ran, ran, and ran until I was out of breath. I ran out of the apartment complex. I leaped on the motorcycle we had taken there and distanced myself from the tower.

... And when I finally regained my senses I was here quivering with fear.

Ryougi's apartment, a place that's owner would likely never return. In this desolate, lifeless room, I was just a worthless human being, once again hugging my knees.

"... Dammit."

The word escaped me for the thousandth time. That was all I could do. I was the worst. I left Ryougi behind and ran. Even though I saw both of my parents' dead bodies right before my eyes, I didn't feel any guilt. Even though I had experienced the nightmare of my own death as reality, I couldn't feel anything.

At the very least, I should have been able to make sense of what had just happened. But my brain just wouldn't work.

"Dammit."

I said the same thing again, even as I continued to shake uncontrollably.

I let out a burst of laughter. I had been doing everything alone up until now.

But now, I couldn't do anything on my own.

I wasn't even able to help Ryougi.

"..... Damn, it.....!"

I screamed, but my head felt broken.

Going to help Ryougi meant fighting against that man. Just remembering Araya's appearance caused me to shake in fear, I was in no condition to help Ryougi.

Clank, clank.

... A strange sound, like the gears of a clock grinding.

I felt pain in my left elbow. I must have injured it while running away, it felt like the bone was cracked and the pain reverberated through me.

I was at my limit, both physically and mentally. The headache wouldn't stop. The pain in my joints refused to fade. Even breathing felt difficult, it was painful.

"....."

Crying. I was crying. I was hugging my knees and crying in frustration. I was alone, I felt sorry for myself, it hurt, and I started crying.

And so, alone, all I could do was cry, I realized that I was a fake. After all, I was just like everyone else, living a fake and aimless life. I had wanted to be the real thing, like Ryougi, but the attributes I was born with couldn't be disguised.

The real thing..?

Actually, there was one time where I did have such an aspiration before.

It was... yes, not so long ago.

I stopped clutching my knees and shifted my gaze to the the bed. Ryougi had always slept there, but she was gone now. In her place there was a Japanese sword lying there.

... The woman who had believed me when I told her I was a murderer.

... The woman who had treated me completely naturally, even though I was a murderer.

... The woman who had helped me.

... The first person I had ever wanted to be with.

How could I have forgotten?

Those feelings weren't fake.

I seriously did want to protect her.

"–What am I?"

I was trying to protect her, I wanted to protect her, was that it?

"–––"

I didn't really understand. But one thing I did know was that, not even once, had I ever thought that my life was the most important thing. There was always something else. Something more important, something that I wanted help with. That was why, on that day, I ran away from my home.

"Damn, how pathetic."

"Then, can you die for me?"

That's what Ryougi asked me, and I answered her, didn't I?

What was I afraid of?

I already decided on what I needed to do. So, no matter how pathetic I might look to anyone else, no matter how much of a bluff it might be, I have to stand up.

"... That's right. Yeah, fine, Ryougi. Enjou Tomoe will die for you."

Muttering that, I tightly gripped the knife Ryougi had left behind.

At that instant, the door bell rang out.

Ding-dong, the cheerful chime made me spring to my feet in alarm.

Was Araya coming after me or was it just a visitor?

Since this was Ryougi's home, it couldn't be a visitor. That meant the person had to be connected to Araya. I initially decided to stay put and not answer, but quickly changed my mind.

... I made up my mind. The moment I opened that door, I'll attack them and force them to tell me where Ryougi was. I made my way to the front door, still holding the knife. In a calm voice I called out, "I'm opening it now." Then I opened the door.

"Who are you–?"

I grabbed the person and dragged him forcefully into the room.

Thud, I pinned him down in the hallway and slammed the door shut with my heel. As I had caught him off guard, there was nothing he could do.

I straddled him, preparing to hit him, but stopped at the last moment. The person I had pinned down was, at a glance, obviously harmless. He was someone who didn't seem like he'd be a visitor to Ryougi's home, let alone one of Araya's subordinates.

"... Who are you?"

He gave no answer to my muttering. He merely looked up at me, blinking in surprise.

He had black hair and soft eyes underneath black framed glasses. He looked to be only a few years older than me. Though he wore entirely black clothes, he didn't look suspicious at all.

"Are you an acquaintance of Ryougi's?"

"Yes, but who are you...?"

Even though I yanked him into the room suddenly and had nearly hit him, the man replied calmly.

"Me? I'm..."

Come to think of it, just what was I to Ryougi? I was unable to come up with a good answer and it was irritating.

"Who cares about that? Ryougi's not here. Just get out of here."

I got off of him and stood up. The man remained on the floor in the hallway, staring at my hand.

"What is it? I'm sorry for knocking you down, but I don't have time to deal with you ."

"That's Shiki's knife isn't it? Why are you holding it?"

The man stared at the knife I was holding with a sharpness that was unexpected.

"... This is something I'm holding onto for her. It's got nothing to do with you."

I looked away as I answered, but the man replied in a calm voice, "Yes, it does," and stood up.

"Shiki never lets anyone touch her blades. Especially not that knife. The fact that you're holding it, means either that Shiki has completely changed her beliefs–"

The man stepped forward and grabbed me by the collar.

"–Or that you stole it from her."

The man's gaze was not intimidating, but his eyes were so direct that it made me want to look away. I brushed off the man's arm that was grabbing my collar.

"It's neither. This is something Ryougi lost. That's why... I'm going to quickly give it back to her myself."

Saying that, I turned my back on him. I needed to get ready in the living room.

"Wait... Are you one of their companions?"

The man behind me asked. I was going to ignore him, but something about the way he said it caught my attention.

"Their? Who are you talking about?"

"The guys from the Ogawa Apartment Complex."

With a short, sharp voice like a blade or thorn, the man replied. I stopped dead in my tracks. He was fishing for information, and I fell for it.

"... I see, so Shiki really was captured?"

With that, the man placed his hand on the entrance way door knob. For some reason, in that moment, I had the thought that he was going to get there first.

"Hey."

Without thinking, I called out to him. I should've let him go, but I felt that I shouldn't let this man go alone. And more than anything, I felt relief when I realized that he had the same goal as me.

"Hey, wait!"

For a different reason than before, I forcefully grabbed the man who had come to the apartment.

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The man claimed to be a friend of Ryougi's from high school. I wasn't interested in the details right now. My only goal was to save Ryougi, and his only concern was helping her too.

Without revealing our names, we shared information. According to him, a man in a red coat named Alba had shown up earlier today and openly declared that he had kidnapped Ryougi. The time matched up; Ryougi and I had gone to the apartment complex last night.

Glancing at the clock I could see that it was almost seven in the evening. That meant that a full day had passed since then.

The man said he had been waiting for someone named Touko, but it seemed she had been defeated. Left alone, he had decided to take action now instead of waiting until tomorrow.

I told the man everything about what had happened last night. I told him about the apartment complex's east and west towers. I told him about the two versions of my home. I told him about how the monster named Araya had captured Ryougi... I told him about how I had met Ryougi when I was wandering the streets after killing my parents.

The man listened to my story intently. Even to me, who had been at the heart of all these strange events, it sounded like a lie as I was explaining it. Yet, he listened without showing any signs of doubt.

"... So what do you think?"

After hearing my story, the man merely posed a question while wearing a serious expression.

"There's nothing to think about. Ryougi is still somewhere in that apartment complex. What else can we do other than save her?"

"That's not what I mean. I'm talking about your parents, which ones do you think were real?"

The man had spoken while looking at me with a worried expression in his eyes. It was something I hadn't thought of. My parents, the parents who had raised Enjou Tomoe, the parents who I had killed.

"... That doesn't matter! Let's deal with that later!"

"It does matter. According to Touko-san, that apartment complex's structure was deliberately designed to make it easy to induce mental disorders. If there was a family that committed murder-suicide together, the blame doesn't lie with the family, but with the one who created that apartment complex. It's the same for you. You said you killed your parents because you were having dreams of being killed, but was that truly of your own will? Did you actually kill your parents? Or, by the time you had laid hands on them, weren't they already long dead?"

The man seemed to stare at me piercingly. This guy didn't seem to glare at me, but I still felt as if he was looking down into the depths of my heart. He was the exact opposite of Ryougi, yet equally able to expose the truth.

... I had noticed the paradox already. Somewhere in my heart I had already understood. I knew the truth of the parents I killed with my own hands. But if I admitted that, one reality I didn't want to accept would emerge. I had no choice but to deny it.

"... I killed them. That alone is true. I can still recall the feeling of killing my mother with my hands. It's true that I killed my parents a month ago. There's no way to deny it."

"What about your father? In everything you've said so far, you keep mentioning your mother, but you haven't once brought up your father. Maybe the only one you killed was your mother."

"You're persistent. I told you my father was dead too. I saw his dead body and I....."

I started to say this but then stopped as I realized something. It was true that my father's body was there too. But was that something I did? I remember going as far as laying hands on my mother, but I have no memory at all of how I killed my father.

My father had already been killed by my mother, as evidenced by the corpses of my parents from half a year ago. Most likely, tonight as well, the members of the Enjou family will have all been killed by my mother. The parents I killed, they were the ones who killed me night after night.

That dream was real.

I wasn't here to escape from a dream–

Instead to escape from reality, with these hands–

Clack, the sound of gears grinding.

"–Shut up! I don't care about my parents. I'm only going to save Ryougi. I don't know anything else."

That's right, this right now is the only truth I have. There is no point in thinking about anything else.

"So, do you have a plan? If you were planning to save her on your own, you must have thought of something." I glared as I said it, and the man gave a halfhearted nod.

"I have an idea, but after hearing what you said, I've changed my mind. This isn't something we can handle. I think we should leave it to the police."

With a serious expression, the man muttered this almost to himself.

... What is this guy saying at this point? There's no way we can rely on those guys.

"Are you serious?"

The man shrugged his shoulders and shook his head as if saying no.

"I'm not serious, but that kind of judgment is also necessary. From what I can see, you're worrying about this too much. Shiki is important, but aside from that, you have to value your own life."

"Shut up! You couldn't understand how I feel...! I have nothing. No one protected me, and I've not been able to protect anyone. At the very least, the only thing I have left is to save Ryougi. The only thing I can do is fulfill my promise to die for her!"

I got that far before my chest tightened.

I recognized this feeling. It was the same as that night. It was not simply that I wanted to help Ryougi, but rather that I wanted to die saving Ryougi.

Right now it hurt too much to go on living. Since I had nothing left, not even a reason to keep going. However, I still didn't want to die a meaningless death. So dying for the sake of Ryougi would be deeply meaningful.

Dying for the woman I love, that was more than enough for me.

... This man recognized my true feelings, that was why he was looking at me with pain in his eyes.

"You don't understand."

That was all I could mutter.

The man quietly stood up.

"Alright. Let's go save Shiki. But before that, there's somewhere we need to stop by. I'll need you to come with me, Enjou Tomoe."

Speaking my name, though I had never told him it, the man began walking into the night.

I followed the man and we boarded a train. The train we got on headed in a completely different direction from the apartment complex, and we arrived at a station I didn't recognize. The town was a quiet residential area, far away from the bustle of the city's center. The station didn't even have a traffic circle in front of it, just two small convenience stores provided a small sense of activity.

"This way."

The man quickly read the map in front of the station and started walking. We walked for a few minutes and the houses that surrounded us had fallen silent after dinner. The roads were dark, with only the dim glow of streetlights providing unreliable lighting. Narrow roads, narrow bridges; at the garbage collection point, stray dogs loitered like homeless people, giving the area an unrefined feel.

This man really was coming here for the first time. I thought initially we were going to make preparations related to saving Ryougi, but it seemed like that was not the case. I silently followed the man while we walked, as I did so I grew more and more of irritated. We don't have time to be walking in a place like this.

"Hey, enough already. Where are you taking us?"

"We're almost there. Look at that park over there. See the field next to it? Right beside that."

I followed the man through the park. There was no one in the park at night. No, even during the day, this park was probably empty. It was a small, nondescript playground; just a flat, leveled piece of ground. Not even a slide or a jungle gym was there. The solitary set of horizontal bars, placed there as if out of obligation, had rusted over and left one to wonder how many years it had been since they had been polished.

"... Huh?"

Something flashed through the back of my mind. I... definitely knew this park.

When I was little, so young that I had neither the need nor the occasion to remember it anymore, I had played here. As I stood there looking the place over, I noticed that the man had gotten pretty far ahead of me. He stopped in front of a house past the field next to the park, so I jogged over to him.

The man was looking at the house silently. As I caught up with him he returned my gaze, his eyes looked very sorrowful. Prompted by those eyes, I turned my face towards what the man had been looking at moments ago.

–I was in a daze.

..... There was a house. A small, single-story house.

The gate was more than half decayed, and the garden was overgrown with weeds. Those weeds and other growth extended all the way up to the house's walls itself. The walls were peeling in places, giving the house the look of a worn-out old dog rather than a home.

How long had it been since people lived here?

This was no longer a house, it was nothing but a ruin.

"....."

I couldn't speak.

I stared intently at the ruin and without realizing it, I began to cry.

It wasn't sadness, nor was it regret. The tears simply overflowed and wouldn't stop.

I didn't know any of this. I had never seen this sort of thing.

But my soul remembered it. Enjou Tomoe would never let me forget it.

No matter how much the adult me might try to abandon it, Tomoe had always, always remembered this place.

–My, home–.

The place I had lived until I was eight years old, memories of days long forgotten.

"... Enjou. Where's your house?"

When she asked me that question, the girl frowned in irritation and shook her head.

"I mean the home you want to return to. If you don't know, that's fine."

... Was this the place you were talking about, Ryougi?

But now, what could possibly be here anymore? There was no use for a ruin that was crumbling, broken, and unrecognizable.

The house was filled only with painful memories. My father was a tyrant inside that house, he had stopped working and took out his frustrations on me. My mother was like a wooden doll, she had obeyed his every word and would only respond with "Yes."

I never even had enough food or warm clothing. To me, my parents were nothing but a nuisance. This was why I considered Ryougi more important to me than even my own parents.

It was supposed to be important.

So why, why was I crying so much?

Even when I saw my parents' skeletons, it was the same. Something went numb, and I couldn't move. I forgot something important, and it was heartbreaking.

"... What's, this?"

I muttered this as I entered the garden of the ruins.

The garden was small. It would have been just the right size for a family of three to live in, but now that I'm an adult it feels cramped compared to when I was a kid.

... I remembered this garden.

My father laughing happily as his strong arm patted my head, laughing happily. My mother's gentle figure, smiling warmly as she saw me off. I couldn't believe it. Could such dreamlike, happy days have really existed for me?

Did I really once have such normal happiness?

"–Tomoe."

A voice called out. When the child turned, there was a young man with a stern, resolute face.

"I'm going to entrust something very important to you, so come over here."

The small child ran up to the young man's feet, he was a child with curly red hair, almost like a girl's.

"Dad, what is this?"

"It's the house key. Don't lose it, keep it with you at all times. You're a boy, protect mom with that."

"I protect her with a key?"

"That's right. A house key is something very important that protects the family. It lets you lock the doors securely, you should be alright even when mom and dad aren't home. The key is proof of the family."

... How much of his father's words could the young child have understood?

Even so, the child tightly held the key in his small hand, he raised his head and responded.

"Okay, I understand. I'll cherish it. I'll protect our home. Even if I'm alone, I'll do it properly–"

The strength left my legs and caused me to fall on my backside in the garden. I tried to stand back up, but I couldn't. The past memories were so vividly burned into my mind, that my body could no longer move properly now.

... That's right. To me, a house key was something meant to protect the family. It was like a treasure, the proof of the family.

The household fell apart, leaving not even the slightest trace of what it used to be.

I cursed it, I had forgotten about those past days entirely since the present was so harsh

... The past, memories from when the family was still peaceful. Parents who prioritized their child's growth above all else; a kind mother, a proud father. Those were the real thing. I was an idiot for deciding that they were fake just because time had passed and those things were lost.

My parents were so kind back then, tomorrow's world had looked so bright.

Having been so absorbed in the present, I judged my parents as failures and shut them out. I ignored their pleas for help and closed my heart off to them.

Must things, be eternal?

No, to wish for eternity was wrong. My parents' feelings were the real thing. I had forgotten that, and I was running away, turning the real victims into perpetrators.

... My father was facing persecution from those around him and couldn't work; even though he wanted to. My mother endured being talked about behind her back at her part-time job; but still kept working.

For both of them, I was their only salvation.

Whenever I got home from work my mother was always waiting for me, she always seemed like she had something she wanted to say. However I kept turning my back on her as if to say "I didn't want to hear my parents' voices." I wasn't the only one suffering. My mother must have been suffering more than I was.

She had no one to talk to, she was beaten by my father, and she kept working silently.

It was no wonder her heart broke. If... If I had turned around just once, that wouldn't have happened.

"... I'm such... an idiot."

Unable to stop the tears, I covered my face.

I don't care if it was a dream or if the apartment complex had caused my parent's deaths.

The one at fault was me. My mother was the victim, and yet I blamed her further without even looking back. It was me who killed my parents. It was me, more than anyone, who should have saved them.

Now I had to atone for that.

Still sitting, I gripped the dirt in the garden tightly.

The tears had stopped.

The reason I had cried, yes, it wasn't because I was frustrated like before.

I was crying because I was sorrowful, the fact that my parents had died was too heavy to bear. For the first time... Half a year after their deaths, I finally shed tears as a farewell ceremony.

But that was to end here. I couldn't spend forever on this detour. I had finally made it back to the starting line.

–The wind had stopped and I heard a signal ring out.

Now, it was time for me to start running for real–

... I finally noticed that the man had been behind me the entire time.

He didn't say a word, just looked at me curled up in the garden.

It was annoying to admit, but I definitely needed to come here. But having my tear-streaked face seen like this, I couldn't bring myself to be honest about it... No, I'm sure I'll stay defiant until the end with this guy. After all, I'm not the kind of person who makes a habit of getting friendly with a romantic rival.

"Damn, are you satisfied now?" I spat out the words without turning around.

The man nodded, looking pained.

"... I'm sorry. I know about your misfortune, but I can't say anything."

Yeah, of course. The only one who could understand my pain was me.

I didn't want anyone else to explain my pain to me; to act like a sympathetic person. In that sense, what this guy had said felt remarkably honest.

"I was born into a happy family and raised happily. That's why I can't say anything."

... Yeah, this guy was a good person.

For someone like me right now, even words of comfort would feel like a lie. I hate people's sympathy, but I also knew that rejecting someone's sympathy always came back to haunt me in the end. This guy didn't want to make me feel that kind of unpleasantness.

"Tch, if you understand, then shut up, you idiot."

"But you wouldn't understand unless I put it into words, would you? I don't know how many places you've been until now, but if there's nothing left... Then the most important thing to you right now is your own self. Neglecting that is absolutely wrong."

Under the moonlight the man had said such a thing.

More than anything else, the most important thing was oneself.

The thing worth protecting, even if it meant deceiving others, was the life of Enjou Tomoe.

Yeah, perhaps that was the purest truth; not a fake, not an embellishment, but the raw, true nature.

If I found that ugly, it must have been because I was weak. That night, when I declared I'd die for Ryougi, and Shiki scorned me, it was because of that too.

... It was something else, for such completely different types of people to have ended up teaching me the same thing.

While still crouched on the ground, I began to chuckle.

The man offered me his hand to pull me up.

"If you can't stand on your own, I'll lend you a hand."

... I squinted at it as though it were dazzling, then slowly brushed it aside.

The joints in my body screamed out in protest, but this was a pride I had to uphold until the day I died.

Enjou Tomoe stood up.

"Mind your own business. I've always done everything by myself."

Though, in the end, that was just my own self-centered delusion.

The man gave a brief, indifferent laugh.

"Yeah, I thought you'd say that."

Strangely enough, his smile made me want to smile back.

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The man's plan was simple.

Ryougi was reportedly imprisoned somewhere on the tenth floor of the west wing of the apartment complex. If we entered through the front lobby and took the elevator, the enemy would notice us immediately. Therefore, the man assigned himself the role of decoy, while I was given the task of rescuing Ryougi.

The man was confident that Araya and his group would pay more attention to an outsider like him wandering around than to me, a resident of the apartment complex.

“But, won’t they eventually notice me too?”

“You’ll be entering through the basement. Here’s the is the floor plan of that apartment complex. There is an underground parking lot you, see? Enter the sewers from a manhole a little ways away, from there you can sneak in. The apartment complex’s underground parking lot isn’t even in use right?”

What the man said made perfect sense. As he mentioned, the underground parking lot in that apartment complex wasn’t open for use. Even though the elevator had a “B” button, it didn’t allow access from the ground level to the basement.

“They’ve probably set up their Workshop down there. Using an underground parking lot, the sound won’t escape to the outside, and it wouldn’t seem suspicious at all.”

As he spoke, he handed me a leather bag filled with tools like a jack and screwdrivers. They were for getting into the parking lot when climbing into it from the sewer. The car the man was driving eventually reached the reclaimed land where the apartment complex was located.

We parked the car on a road about a kilometer away from the apartment complex and got out.

The time was ten o’clock at night. There was already no one on the streets.

“Look, there’s the manhole. From there head west in the sewer system and then go up at the seventh manhole into the underground parking lot.”

“Man, you make it sound easy.” I complained as I prepared myself.

Inside the bag of tools was Ryougi’s knife she had left behind, and... just in case, I also borrowed the Japanese sword from Ryougi’s room. It would be a good idea to have as many weapons as possible if Araya found me.

“Let’s sync our watches then. When it reaches ten-thirty I’m going to head into the apartment complex, so that’s when you should be coming up into the parking lot from the sewers.” The man said, giving instructions in an experienced manner.

Taking the opportunity, I decided to ask something that had been bothering me.

“... I’m used to this kind of thing, but why are you going so far with this? Is it for Ryougi?”

The man gave no response to my question other than a troubled facial expression.

“Hey. We might die you know? Aren’t you scared?”

“Of course I’m scared. Honestly, I’m not cut out for a role like this.”

The man closed his eyes as he spoke. His voice was calm, as if he were talking to himself.

“I’m surprised at myself, honestly. This is a huge adventure for me... But, not long ago, I met someone who could see into the future; someone who could see a bit ahead into reality.”

“Huh?” ... What he had suddenly said was incomprehensible.

"That person told me that being involved with Shiki would lead to a life-threatening incident."

The man was serious as he said this, so I replied accordingly.

"Ah, well, that's probably right now. So, what did they say about the outcome?"

The man shrugged and shook his head.

"Apparently... I won't die, or so they said."

He added, "That's what's giving me the push to do something reckless."

Hearing such a vague yet characteristically "him" reason, I slung my gear over my shoulder.

It was nice and easy to do something ordinary like this.

... But really, it was about time I started running.

"I need to thank you. Oh yeah, we haven't told each other our names yet. I'm Enjou Tomoe, and you?"

... I knew that he already knew my name, but I decided to introduce myself.

The man's name was Kokutou Mikiya... It was a name I remembered hearing from Shiki once before.

"I see. Your last name does sound like a certain poet, doesn't it?"

Then I grabbed the man's hand and placed a key on his palm.

It was something I no longer needed, the key to Ryougi's house.

–A long time ago.

A tiny piece of metal that I had thought as a treasure.

"What is this?"

"Just keep it. You have to protect her from now on."

I tried to smile nicely.

I don't know if I smiled well.

"We shouldn't see each other again after all of this is over. Don't even look for each other. As two guys who fell for the same woman, let's part ways cleanly."

The man started to ask, "Why?" But then frowned.

... At a glance, he seems laid-back, but this guy was sharp. He instantly understood what I meant.

"That's how it is. I don't know you, and you shouldn't care about me either. We'd have a guilty conscience if one of us died because of what the other guy did. So, we should make a promise not to meet again."

And so, I took a step forward.

The man said nothing and simply watched me leave.

As I started running, I waved goodbye with one hand.

“See ya! I’ll start over again after this. I love Ryougi, but she doesn’t need me. You don’t really match with Ryougi, but that’s exactly why it works... For me, I just felt reassured seeing the same thing in Ryougi that I saw in myself. A person like you suits people like me and her, someone so harmless it’s almost ridiculous–”

And so I ran.

I never looked back, not even once.

/14

Kokutou Mikiya stepped into the desolate apartment complex where the only life felt mechanical. He passed through a garden that gave no scent of greenery, and entered a lobby filled with artificial light.

There was not a sound in the lobby.

The cream-colored lobby was impeccably clean. The light from the electric lights was absorbed into the walls and floor, without a single reflection, leaving this place no sense of light or darkness.

Previously, when he had visited during the day, a tepid chill had filled this apartment complex. But now it was different. Now that he was here in the middle of the night, a stifling silence filled this alien world.

The sound of each footstep immediately dissipated.

It was cold. Even the air seemed to have its role perfectly defined, and with every step, it became harder to breathe. Kokutou Mikiya fully realized that he was an outsider in this alien world.

Even so, there was no way he could turn back now. Like pushing through water, Mikiya advanced into the lobby.

“I’ll start from the third floor for now.”

Instead of taking the stairs, he decided to use the elevator. He pushed the elevator button. A loud mechanical sound rang out as the elevator descended from the fifth floor.

The doors opened silently.

“–Eh.”

Unable to immediately comprehend what was standing there, Mikiya gasped and took a slight step back.

“Hey there, nice timing. I was thinking of going to see you just now.”

The young man in the red coat was standing inside the elevator, he spoke with a laugh.

Mikiya desperately held back the nausea that surged up to his throat with one hand. He staggered back a few steps and continued to stare at the young man with a frightened, yet tearful look on his face. He knew he shouldn't look, but he couldn't take his eyes off it.

"Isn't it nice? I like it too."

The young man smiled pleasantly and held it up in one hand.

Mikiya couldn't take his eyes off of it.

The young man in the red coat was holding Aozaki Touko's head in one hand.

Touko's head was in very good condition.

Its color and texture were unchanged from when she was alive. Her face was as beautiful as a painting, with her eyelids closed as though she were just sleeping.

She was exactly as she had been in life. The only difference was that everything below her neck was gone.

"Ah–"

Covering his mouth with one hand, Mikiya desperately suppressed the nausea rising within him. That was all he could manage. Standing there in a daze, all he could do was hold back the numerous things threatening to spill from his mouth.

"You've come to avenge your master, haven't you? Such a noble sentiment. Aozaki truly has an admirable disciple. I'm envious."

The young man in the red coat stepped out of the elevator. His smile was distorted, it was like a fake smile was pasted onto his face.

"As you can see, your master has died. But she isn't completely dead yet. Her consciousness remains. She can hear the sounds around her and understand what they are. It's an act of mercy, really. Mercy. She gave me a great deal of trouble, but I believe in showing respect to the dead. So I've decided to let her live just a little longer."

Cloaked in crimson, like flowing blood, the young man slowly approached Mikiya. His movements were natural, like a demon seducing a priest who could not resist temptation.

"For what reason, you ask? Simple. Because this alone isn't enough to satisfy me. Merely killing her wouldn't even begin to repay the humiliation I've endured for years. She needs to truly experience what pain means. Oh, but no, no, don't misunderstand. When I say pain, I don't mean physical pain. After all, to someone who is only a head, wounds to the body would be a minor issue, wouldn't they?"

As he spoke, the young man placed his fingers on the severed head in his hand. He pressed his fingers into the lifeless eyes of the deceased woman and gouged out her eyeballs, causing blood to flow down her cheeks.

Like a waterfall, the blood ran down her cheeks as if it were tears.

The blood-covered eyeballs were now nothing like the eyes she had in life. They were merely round lumps of flesh.

The young man tried to hand it to the unresponsive Mikiya.

"See, she won't even groan from something like this! But don't worry, she still has her sense of pain. Aozaki is very patient so she won't say anything, but I wonder, what does it feel like to have your eyes gouged out? Does it hurt, does it hurt? Does it hurt so much you'd cry? Hey, what do you think? You're her disciple, so you should understand how your master feels!"

Mikiya didn't answer. His nerves were barely hanging on, and he no longer had the capacity to think about anything.

The young man in the red coat looked at him with satisfaction.

"Haha! Really, I'm sure it's probably not too painful. And speaking earnestly, I care less about hurting her than I do about making her feel humiliated. Being reduced to just a head like this must already be an excruciating humiliation for Aozaki. But you see, I can provide her with an even greater rank of humiliation. That's why I needed you. Hey, you. Do you understand what it feels like to have something you have worked so diligently on destroyed? To experience that right before your eyes, fully realizing your own helplessness, unable to even cry out? Heh heh, I couldn't bear it myself. Even if I killed the one who destroyed it, that wouldn't help me feel better. Do you understand? This woman, who ignored me all this time, now despises me enough to want to kill me. Isn't it wonderful? Beautiful, what revenge could be better than this? Though Araya claimed the act of directly killing her, this part, I can't allow anyone else to take from me."

The young man in the red coat spoke to the severed head which didn't move a single brow. Then he suddenly grabbed the head with both hands, red tears to welled up from its eye sockets.

"When I found out Aozaki had a disciple, I was overjoyed. From that moment on, I had my eye on you. If you must hate someone, curse your master instead of me. Rest assured, I wouldn't do something so cruel as to send you to hell alone. This head. As I said, even like this, she's still alive isn't she? But, you see–"

The young man laughed, as if both of his hands were a vise he crushed the head.

Like an apple, what had been Aozaki Touko split apart and fell to the ground.

"Look, now she's dead."

The young man laughed with enough force to reverberate across the entire lobby.

Mikiya ran without saying anything. Seeing what had once been Touko reduced to a lump of flesh and then crushed before his eyes had burned away his rationality.

Instead of heading outside Mikiya ran toward the east tower lobby. He couldn't remember whether or not that side had a dead end.

Yet, it could be said it was admirable that he did not scream.

"Now then, the curtain's closing. Wait for me, I'll let you join her soon enough."

The young man stopped his laughter and began to slowly follow after him. His blood-stained hands remained as they were, dripping red droplets onto the floor as he walked.

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The underground sewer was like a labyrinth.

Of course there was no light, only the noise of the flowing wastewater provided any sense of the passage of time.

Even so, Enjou Tomoe held the sewer map prepared by Mikiya in one hand and managed to arrive at his destination. There was a narrow hole in the ceiling above him. He switched off the flashlight he had been using and climbed the ladder built into the wall.

After climbing a few meters, he reached the opening. He used a screwdriver to wedge a gap where the manhole cover contacted the edge of the opening, then he then used a spanner to widen the gap. Once that was done, Tomoe used his brute strength to push the cover upward.

Clang, there was a metallic sound when the round iron cover rolled aside to the floor.

It was impossible to discern anything in the darkness of the underground parking lot. Tomoe tossed the leather bag of tools up into the parking lot first, then climbed the ladder with Shiki's knife and katana strapped to his back.

"....."

There were no lights in the parking lot, and Tomoe looked around quietly.

... Something felt funny.

Even though he was sneaking in, he had no feeling that there was a danger of being found. Tomoe couldn't even guess how large the underground parking lot was. There was no light, only the sound of steam echoing, leaving it unclear how large the space was.

"The sound of... steam..?" Muttering this, Tomoe suddenly felt a dizzying vertigo.

This darkness, the smell of this space; Tomoe recognized it.

No, it wasn't that he recognized it. Even now, he felt it was close to him.

"–I'm..... back.....?"

Shiver, his body began to tremble.

Click, click, a strange clattering noise echoed throughout his mind.

Unconsciously, Enjou Tomoe looked around at his surroundings.

There was no light, and the room was dark.

This place was hot.

Only the sound of a sizzling metal plate and the magma-like glow served as guides.

Large jars lined the surrounding walls.

Long, thin tubes were scattered across the floor.

There was no one here. Only the sound of steam and the bubbling of water could be heard.....

.....

..... Always, he had felt this.

"___"

Without uttering a sound, Tomoe had begun to step forward.

His body was heavy, he was reaching his limit.

In the middle of the room the metal plate was glowing red hot.

The metal plate in the center of the room was being heated by fire. Periodically, water was sprinkled onto the metal plate, which turned into steam and disappeared into the ceiling of the room.

The ceiling had multiple layers of pipes. The pipes sucked in the steam and carried what seemed to be air along the walls to the jars that surrounded the room.

"... Ha, ha."

With feeble steps, Tomoe drew near to the jars.

There were countless jars, each about the size of a human head.

Inside was an indistinct lump, floating softly, like something preserved in formalin in a laboratory.

No matter how he looked at it, it only appeared to be a human brain.

From the bottom of each jar, a single tube extended, tracing along the floor, climbing the wall, and piercing through the ceiling. "Probably connected to the rooms of the apartment complex," Tomoe thought as if it were someone else's problem.

"What the hell? This is like some cheap horror story isn't it?"

Laughing to himself, Tomoe walked along the wall.

... He should have thought about it more. The people who repeated the same lives every day weren't actually living the same today as yesterday. If they were, their abnormality would have been exposed to the outside world. After all, they were living humans who experienced slight, insignificant changes, but nothing major, in the spiraling repetition of their daily lives.

For that purpose, the people had to not be killed. Their brains, that which thought and moved their bodies, had to remain alive. It was difficult to consider objects that merely thought as alive, but regardless, their brains alone had to continue functioning. Every night, separate from the bodies that died, they existed as individuals who lived their daily lives solely to die again at night.

Was that... not hell?

Dying, living, dying, living. It was simply that, a closed loop. Where the humans themselves were part of the closed loop. Unable to escape, unable to stop, unable even to question it, it was a prison for the soul.

... Their ends repeated every night, each day they woke up and mistook it for a dream.

Enjou Tomoe saw the reality of this nightmare every night.

"... I see. Yeah, so that's how it is." As he muttered this, Tomoe extended a hand to touch one of the jars.

–He heard a voice he shouldn't have been able to hear.

An awareness that shouldn't exist whispered just two words.

"Help me," the jar said.

Tomoe laughed.

... Because there was nothing he could do.

Help you with what? Do you want to return to your previous human form?

Or was it simply that you wanted to be freed from this endless repetition?

Either way, it was an impossible request.

"–All I can do is kill you."

And so he laughed, out of sadness, frustration, absurdity; there was nothing else he could do but laugh.

"... I'm the same. I wanted someone to save me. I always wanted someone to save me. But I never knew what I wanted to be saved from... But now I see. I wasn't supposed to know. Because there's no way to be saved. No matter how much you try to reinterpret the meaning, you can't erase the very first phenomenon that caused everything."

Tomoe searched as he apologized.

It had to be there. If would be weird if it weren't. Things wouldn't add up.

... The Magus, Araya, didn't personally kill the residents of the apartment complex to harvest their brains. Instead, after the residents killed one another, he collected their brains to make them repeat their final day over and over again.

So, it had to exist. The cause. The reason why he, Enjou Tomoe, kept repeating that night every single day. The reality that had happened half a year ago.

He found it soon enough.

But it was the one thing he hadn't wanted to find.

"Haha–"

Affectionately, Tomoe touched the jar.

It was like he was looking at himself in a mirror. In that moment, with his own eyes, he was gazing at himself.

There were two tubes, one went to the ceiling and the other was cut off halfway. It had been removed from this everyday apartment, as if it was going to be disposed of.

Clatter, there was a clanking sound.

It was the sound of his left arm, which had been injured since yesterday. From the elbow down it had dropped onto the floor.

Drip, drip, something like blood spilled from the elbow.

The cross-section of the fallen arm showed not only things that looked like bone and muscle but also things resembling gears were mixed in.

Click, click, clack, click.

That sound, that strange sound that had been there ever since that night when he had sat there in a daze, not even understanding what he was.

When he had been hit, when someone had called his name, when he had finally activated, realizing that he was something called Enjou Tomoe, the sound of those gears had begun to echo. On one of those endlessly repeating nights, he had been a doll who fled the predetermined script, killing his own mother to escape being killed himself–

That was... me.

"Heh heh... Ahaha."

Dropping to his knees as if dazed, Tomoe laughed.

"Hehe, Hehehe, Hyahahahahaha!"

The voice of a madman filled the parking garage.

–It was laughable.

I knew it. I knew I was a fake from the very beginning, but to think I was really just an artificial creation.

My head was empty. Completely blank, with not a single thought coming to mind.

And yet.

Even though I couldn't think about anything, the laughter just wouldn't stop.

"... Hehe, hehe, heh... Ahaha––ha."

It was truly absurd.

If something like this was possible, then why? Why couldn't I, or my family, ever once escape this tragedy?

I had repeated it tens, hundreds of times, and the only way to try to escape it was to kill my own mother. It was hopeless.

I wasn't the real Enjou Tomoe but an artificial version of him. Is that why that I couldn't change the outcome that had already happened? Was it because I was a fake that everything went exactly how Araya wanted it to?

Did he realize there was nothing I could do and just let me escape because I was a fake?

"He's wrong."

Tomoe started walking as he muttered this.

Click, click.

The sound of gears echoed. The sound resembled the voices of the people here. The repeated “help me,” sound refused to let him lose his mind. It wouldn’t let him close his eyes and turn away from reality.

... No, rather.

Tomoe Approached the metal plate, then pressed the elbow of his severed left arm against the scorching metal.

“■■■■■■■––––––––!!!!!!”

A muffled, bitter groan.

Sizzle, the sound of burning flesh.

The blood spilling from the severed end of his arm stopped as the wound was cauterized by the heat.

Tomoe laughed as he pulled his arm, which was no longer bleeding, away from the metal plate.

... Or maybe. Maybe he had already gone insane.

His breath ragged, Tomoe searched for an elevator. It was in the corner of the room. Tomoe pushed the button to call the elevator from where it sat idle on the first floor.

Tomoe stepped into the elevator carrying the knife and katana.

He turned back only once.

The underground, wrapped in the sounds of steam and water, was eerily silent.

It was a resting place for souls, the brains were trapped in a dream of the endless cycle of their daily lives, unaware even of their own deaths.

Tomoe thought.

Eternal days that never change, or eternal days that never end?

Which of the two could truly be called a spiral? This apartment complex was bizarre and left no doubt about one thing; its eternity. Even in death, even if it were the same day repeating, every morning offered a chance to start over.

As long as one remains within that cycle, the spiral will never deviate.

If only, if only that cycle had slipped out of alignment, just a little, even just slightly, then perhaps a day would have come where Enjou Tomoe would neither be killed by his mother nor would he kill her himself.

But even that was an impossible thought. A misaligned cycle could never revolve in the same way again. This daily existence could only continue by presupposing that the dead remain dead.

Even so, Tomoe thought.

–Yeah.

I wish this spiral was a paradox.

It was an answer that could never exist, a wish that could never come true.

Sensing the end of his own body drawing near, Enjou Tomoe pressed the button for the tenth floor.

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Out of breath, Kokutou Mikiya continued running.

All he could do was run in search of some kind of hopeless salvation. While running he thought about how good it would feel to throw a tantrum and scream like a newborn.

He kept running without looking back, as if to escape from the young man in the red coat. Instead of going outside he ran into the eastern lobby of the building and stopped in a daze.

"... Dead... End..."

He stared at the lobby in shock. Despite there being a staircase to the second floor, the lobby was a complete dead end. Mikiya finally noticed that he had lost his composure.

"Dammit, what is this?"

In his panic he kept complaining to himself even though he should have been prepared for this. But he'd been shown the severed head of someone he'd been close to until yesterday, and it was crushed right before of his eyes. His behavior could be considered relatively sensible.

Mikiya kept his trembling knees still, holding them down with both hands. At all costs, he had to get away now. He looked around the lobby in confusion.

Then... Hard footsteps echoed from the hallway.

"———!"

"Not good," Mikiya thought, and he started running.

For now he decided to use the stairs to go up to the second floor, he intuitively felt it was the best course of action and started moving. But he just barely didn't make it to the stairs. There was a loud *zing*, the sound of something being forcefully cut, and then his legs slumped as he weakly and limply fell to the ground on his knees.

"Ah–!"

His outstretched hand touched the handrail, but it slipped off as he fell onto the stairs.

Lying on the steps, Mikiya looked at his legs.

... Something red was flowing from his knees.

Both of his knees had been cut from behind with what appeared to be a bladed object. But it felt as though it had nothing to do with him, he didn't really feel like he had been hurt.

The wounds felt hot rather than painful. His legs had stopped moving and there wasn't any feeling in them, it was almost like he was looking at someone else's legs.

"Hey hey, it would be a problem if you collapsed just from something like that. That was just meant to be a threat. What are you going to do if you can't deflect the impact of that magical energy boy?"

As if giving a speech the young man in the red coat walked towards Mikiya with his arms outstretched.

Mikiya couldn't say anything. He just stared at his own blood as he crawled on the stairs.

The red blood flowed like water spilling out from a fallen cup. His consciousness was gradually becoming hazy, it wasn't because the red color was sickening, but simply because the blood needed for his bodily functions was being lost.

"Or maybe you're also an expert in constructing things. But if you can't even protect yourself you can't really be called a Magus... Hmm, it seems Aozaki wasn't a very good teacher. That's right, she was full of flaws to begin with. Did you know? In our Association the highest ranking practitioners are given titles bearing colors. Among them, the three primary colors are proof of the best of their time.

"Aozaki wanted the title of Blue, as her name suggests, but the Association didn't give it to her. A pure color doesn't suit a woman who joined the Association for revenge after her younger sister took her family inheritance away. Ironically, Aozaki received the title of Red, which contradicts her last name. She was given a fittingly vulgar color for her first name, which contains the character for orange, a color befitting an orange Magus! A dirty red can't fully be the original red. Heh heh, what a fitting title for that woman!"

The man in the red coat made it to the steps. He gave a satisfied smile as he looked down on Kokutou Mikiya, who was still collapsed and bleeding on the stairs.

"I thought you might have some trick up your sleeve because you're Aozaki's disciple. Honestly, what a complete disappointment. It's fate that you'll die in the same place as your master."

The young man smiled and extended his hand. Slowly, he bent down to grab the boy's face.

Contrary to the man's relaxed movement, Kokutou Mikiya's body suddenly jumped up.

"Mm!?"

The man was so shocked that his mind went blank for a moment.

Taking advantage of that gap, Mikiya quickly raised his upper body like a spring and plunged the silver knife he had hidden underneath himself into the young man.

Kokutou Mikiya used Aozaki's letter opener and stabbed into the young man with all his might. He had prepared it thinking he would never need to actually use it.

The boy closed his eyes and gritted his teeth as if enduring something. Perhaps it was because this was the first time in his life that he had ever committed an act with murderous intent.

The hands holding Mikiya's knife definitely felt like they had stabbed something.

Having let his guard down, the man in the red coat was muttering something incomprehensible. There was no way he could have dodged such a sudden counterattack,

Mikiya hoped the man wasn't seriously injured. With a vague understanding of what happened Mikiya opened his eyes.

However, due to the blood loss from his legs the last thing Mikiya saw as his consciousness became cloudy was the young man having blocked the thrusting knife with the palm of his hand.

The knife was deeply embedded in the man's palm on the hand of his outstretched arm. The man had a devilish grin on his face.

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There was a brief moment of total silence.

"Oh, how terrible you are. Stabbing someone is dangerous." said the man, as he stretched out his other arm.

He grabbed Kokutou Mikiya's face with an iron grip and slammed his head into the stairs with all his might, the back of Kokutou's head hit the step of the stairs.

After striking the stairs once, his head was lifted slightly and struck against them again. It continued over and over again, like a windup doll.

"Dangerous, dangerous, dangerous, dangerous, dangerous, dangerous, dangerous, dangerous, dangerous, dangerous!"

The only sounds in the lobby were the echoing of the man's resonating voice and the banging of the boy's head.

And then, noting that the boy's breathing had become very quiet, the young man finally released his grip and stood up.

"Ahh, that hurt. To give you an idea of how much it hurt, it hurt so much that I was about to cry. If you want to live a long life you shouldn't do things that other people dislike, alright?"

In frustration he pulled the knife out of his palm, as if to show the truth in his words the young man in the red coat nodded.

"Well, now that that's done... I'm interested in Araya's research results, but I think I'll just go back to my homeland. The atmosphere in this country is unbearable."

Turning his back on the motionless Mikiya, the young man began to walk away.

He was going to continue towards the narrow hallway that would lead to the central lobby.

But before he could do that, he paused as something he never expected to see came into view. No, he stopped dead in his tracks.

Clack, Clack. The sound of footsteps could be heard coming from the hallway.

The man, Cornelius Alba, saw something he couldn't believe and staggered back.

Shrill footsteps could be heard in the lobby, the person who came into view was the same person who had been here yesterday.

He couldn't believe it, the young man gasped.

Holding a bag that was too big for one hand, someone who was supposed to be dead was there; Aozaki Touko.

/15

"Don't use that clichéd line 'You should be dead,' Cornelius. It'll show you true character, don't make me more disappointed in you." Aozaki Touko spoke quietly in a voice that contained a hint of superiority.

The young man in the red coat, Alba stared at her speechless... His body was trembling slightly with fear.

Touko arrived in the lobby and put her bag on the floor... There was only one real difference from yesterday. The bag she had yesterday was as big as a briefcase but the one she brought today was much larger. It looked like the kind of bag you'd pack for a trip, it was big enough to fit a person inside of.

"I thought I rushed here, but I guess I didn't make it in time. I corrected you when I told you that Kokutou wasn't my disciple. But just because I haven't taught him anything doesn't mean that he isn't like family."

"You-you should be dead! I'm certain I ended your life with my own hands!"

Refusing to listen to Touko's voice, Alba shouted and clenched his fists. He refused to acknowledge the Touko before his very eyes. Like a child throwing a tantrum, he believed this must have been some kind of mistake.

Touko remained extremely calm in contrast to Alba, who was desperately trying to cover up his inner confusion. Disregarding the man in the red coat, who was glaring at her with bloodshot eyes, she pulled a cigarette out of her pocket.

The more she behaved like Touko, the more Alba couldn't stop the chills that ran down his spine.

Unable to take it any longer, he barked.

"It's impossible for you to be here! This must be some kind of mistake! What are you doing here Aozaki? I don't know how you remain here, but the dead should behave like the dead and leave this world!"

Alba swung his bloodstained arm in a straight line horizontally.

Blood scattered from the palm of his hand where he had been stabbed earlier by Kokutou Mikiya, it flared up like gasoline when it made contact with the air. A visible spell made

from the Magus's own blood and malice took the form of fire and engulfed the enemy who shouldn't have been there.

However, the flames only lasted for a moment; they surrounded Aozaki Touko but dissipated before they could even get close to her.

Touko brushed her hair back lightly and lit the cigarette in her mouth.

"You say that the dead should leave this world, but doesn't this entire apartment complex contradict those words? *I think that if you're alive, then there's no such thing as a corpse*. The line between life and death is like, well, whether or not you like the taste of your cigarettes."

Having said that, Touko gave a strong nod.

"See. That's what makes the difference. If this guy's got no taste, then his life is also meaningless."

With a chuckle Touko sneered.

Overwhelmed by her nature, Alba finally understood. The woman before his eyes was unmistakably alive, and she was as real as ever.

That's exactly why he kept repeating the same denial. Even if he could understand the reality he was facing now, he didn't know how to deal with it.

"You should be dead!"

At the young man's words Touko knit her eyebrows in displeasure. Her amber eyes told him that she was tired of hearing that line.

"Yeah, that was certain death. The body was completely destroyed; and the head, which is the nucleus that's connected to the soul, was crushed by your hands. What else could you call it if not death?"

"Then, what are you here?"

"It's obvious right? I'm Aozaki Touko's replacement." she answered easily.

The man was taken aback by his opponent's overwhelming honesty, his mouth was agape.

"Replacement? Are you a puppet..?"

As those words left his mouth, he stopped that train of thought.

He was also a Puppeteer whose creations were said to be unmatched. At a glance he could perceive the differences between an automaton and a real person, even if it moved in nearly the same way as a human.

No matter how elaborately the outer appearance resembled human form, there was no hiding the internal structure. An artificial body would have flaws; from the blood flow to the muscle fibers. An automaton can imitate everything a human is capable of, but it could never be the same thing.

You could build a model human that surpasses humans, but you can never produce the exact same thing. That is an absolute law that was handed down from the Middle Ages, the proud era of glory when Magecraft was at its most powerful.

And yet, the Aozaki Touko before his eyes could not be mistaken for anything other than a human. A puppet was able to function as a puppet due to the mechanisms within, and they could not be hidden by a puppet. However, this Touko showed no signs of such flaws.

In conclusion, the Aozaki Touko standing here was not an imitation but the real thing. If that was the case...

"I see, then the one I killed was a fake...!?"

"It's no use lying to yourself, Cornelius. You can't seriously think your opponent was a fake."

"Cer-Certainly, that was the real thing. There's no doubt that was you Aozaki. But that's a paradox. You're saying that the present you and the past you are both the real thing? If that's the case, how do you explain this paradox?"

Alba shouted, but then he arrived at the answer.

He shook his head with vigor.

He couldn't believe it, such a thing was impossible... But, there was no other explanation – so this answer was probable.

However, Alba once again asked himself: was such a thing really possible?

"Aozaki. You... can't be–"

"Bingo, this me and the previous me are the same imitation. You know, Alba? Even I myself, don't know when I switched with the real one."

The orange colored Magus spoke with the most wicked smile on her face.

"Wha– That's, that's definitely not possible! Then what are you? You're not the original? Then is there no original anymore? But Aozaki Touko is what you call yourself! There's no way an intelligence with a strong sense of self could be capable of operating normally if it recognizes itself as a fake. A fake that possesses enough intelligence to recognize itself as a fake can't endure its own existence, it'll be crushed by its own ego and destroy itself. It's self-evident. Even with that, you acknowledge yourself as fake..s!"

"A fake that knows it's a fake will destroy itself, huh? Intelligence like that is second rate. Besides, your fear is far removed from me. My body may be fake, but there exists only one Aozaki Touko. Hmph, there's not much time, but here's a souvenir. I'll give you a little lecture."

Her calmness from earlier had completely changed and she looked at Alba with a cold gaze.

"Look, the me you see now had been stored in my Workshop. The moment that you completely killed Aozaki Touko I woke up. Therefore, it's been an hour since I was born. Aozaki Touko is a Puppeteer. During the course of an experiment a few years ago, I created a puppet that was exactly like myself. Not any more capable than myself. Nor any less capable than myself, it is a puppet that has the same exact ability I do. Aozaki Touko saw it and thought, 'With this, maybe there's no need for me now.'"

Alba had his breath taken away at the Puppeteer's confession.

And what was that? He couldn't believe what he had heard.

That was the complete opposite of what he expected. It was understandable to be pleased about creating a puppet equal to oneself. But to be willing to give up one's own existence to a puppet of their own creation was unthinkable.

"That's ridiculous. That's only a step along the way. For argument's sake let's assume you could create a puppet completely identical to a human. Even if you could do something like that, we'll always try to aim higher. A Magus would never be satisfied with the status quo!"

"That's why. *If the puppet is exactly like me, then even if I'm gone it will go on to the next step like I would have.* See, even if I'm not there the result doesn't change."

The young man just gasped.

After a long length of time in awe, he shook his head no.

"That's just reasoning! The self, the absolute ego that is you, can't be thrown away by just logic. I remain me because I'm me. Even if there is something like me and the result is the same, the existence of Cornelius Alba is not something I'd ever transfer! It's not important that my name remains in history. What's the meaning in my name remaining in history if I'm not able to observe it myself!?"

Alba hugged his chest and rebutted the Puppeteer before his eyes. His instincts told him that if he didn't, everything he believed would be negated otherwise.

He was someone who stayed true to himself to the end, and Touko discarded herself in her chosen existence... He could not accept the difference between them, that discrepancy created a hopeless disparity between ordinary people and those who were not.

"It's a difference in the way we think, Alba. I don't blame you for it, I'm envious of you. I don't know when it happened, it's also unrecognizable to me. The current me awoke at the point in time when my active self died. I gained the knowledge that the old Touko had recorded so it won't be any different than before. After this I guess I'll produce a completely identical puppet and put it to sleep.

"At this point I'm without a doubt the real thing when it comes to producing the same puppet. But you see, the me who was killed earlier, in truth, might have been the original. No, the original might be sleeping right now in a place unknown even to me. But, everything is the same vessel so there's already no method to distinguish them. Maybe... that's all I can say, but it's the truth. It's like not recognizing whether the cat is alive or dead until you open the box. In that case – I am definitely Aozaki Touko. To put it plainly, as long as I'm here at the end, the thing you broke earlier was a fake puppet."

Then, she extended her hand to the bag that was placed on the floor.

Alba was shocked, he was looking at someone too distant from him.

"... I see. It's not that Araya wanted to keep you alive. As long as you're alive, the switch in your next body won't activate."

Touko didn't answer him. She merely directed a cold gaze at the man in the red coat. Alba already couldn't bear the irresistible chill he felt throughout, he held himself with both hands.

... The chill had become all the more powerful.

Touko's eyes were machine-like. She had no emotion, but she clearly stared at him with murderous intent. Alba had never known such a look from her. He never saw it during his time at the Association either.

Suddenly, he thought was the human called Aozaki Touko he had known until now, "was she truly the real thing?" The way her figure silently stood here, was that not her unconcealed true self?

Without emotion; without self. Her form of existence was more like a Magus than anything else.

The moment he thought that, the malice he had felt for Aozaki Touko that fueled his revenge had begun to crumble.

Up to now, what on earth had he harbored such delusional thoughts about? Until now, had he really hated the person named Aozaki Touko..? At the very least, the Aozaki Touko he knew was different. She wasn't the kind of monster who would abandon herself so easily, the more excellent one was as a Magus the more one couldn't throw away the uniqueness that was their nature.

Yes, the Touko he knew was a lot more human, even though he had always been conscious of her as such.

"Are you– the real thing?"

Alba unconsciously mumbled with eyes that looked like someone clinging to an ex-lover.

Touko let out an evil laugh.

"Hey, against me, what's the meaning in that question?"

She replied coldly with her beautiful appearance remaining the same.

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Touko held the cigarette between her fingers and brought it to her mouth once again.

Then her eyes said that was enough idle talk.

"Now, let's return to the real issue at hand here, shall we? My boy's life has already been in danger long enough. It's been about an hour since you started tormenting him as you pleased.

"Wh-what?"

It had been about an hour? Come to think of it, Aozaki did mention something about waking up after her head had been crushed. If she had been asleep in her Workshop, then it certainly would have taken an hour to get to this apartment complex. She couldn't have gotten here in just a few minutes, it would've been impossibly fast.

Suddenly, Alba looked at the boy who was lying on the stairs.

... The wounds on his legs were the same, but the back of the boy's head, which he had struck many times, was no longer bleeding.

This boy was unconscious solely due to of the bleeding from his legs.

"Ridiculous, what kind of Magic did you use Aozaki?"

The young man interrogated her weakly.

He had already lost his vigor. The difference between the two Magi had been shown to Alba, there was no way he could have the will to attack Touko anymore.

"In a battle between Magi, a Magus shouldn't talk recklessly about Magic. This is already my third time coming to this lobby. I had constructed a Bounded Field from scratch in this room alone. Just to be safe I took precautions and have prepared some tricks. For example, your thinking went blank when you were surprised by Kokutou's counterattack right? That was me lightly intervening with your consciousness."

"That time..?"

Alba groaned in frustration. It was true that when he had stopped the boy's knife with the palm of his hand, there was some sort of odd blankness.

From that time on, it had felt like he had been dreaming. He must have been standing there blankly until the Magus Touko arrived.

"Haha, Hahaha, I see. You've had me in the palm of your hand since the beginning. I'm sure you had fun, Aozaki. As much as I hate to admit it... It seems that I was the clown from the start."

"Not really. I didn't expect that I'd end up getting killed either. But I have no intention of getting revenge for my death. The reason I returned here once again was for something else, the Kokutou matter is secondary."

Touko knocked over the bag near her feet with a thump.

The overly large bag's shape didn't change much when it fell over. Alba thought the bag which was almost a perfect cube looked similar to something he knew.

"... Not revenge for your death, you say? Then what are you here for, Aozaki? Are you telling me that you're here as a Magus to prevent Araya's attempt to conduct his forbidden experiment?"

"Of course not. That isn't going to succeed anyway. You see, Alba, I'm really only here for you."

Then the young man in the red coat nodded, and thought "I see."

But he didn't understand. Aozaki Touko said she had no resentment over being killed. And she said that she also had no intention of interfering with their experiment, then...

Then, what in the world could be the reason for why this woman had such cold murderous intent pointed towards him?

"... Why? What did I do to you?"

"Nothing really. As long as we're alive, hatred and being hated are things we must accept. To tell you the truth, ever since our time at the Association I haven't found your hatred to be a bad thing. Because it's proof that Aozaki Touko exists."

"Then, why?"

"Simple. You called me by that name."

Then, there was a *bang*.

It was the sound of the bag near Touko's feet opening.

The large bag's contents were actual darkness. It was filled with such a solid darkness that even the light of an electric bulb could not reach.

There were two of them.

"It's a rule I have from our time at the Association. I'll kill anyone who calls me 'dirty red' with no exceptions."

Inside the bag there was a glow.

–Two eyes.

"I see," Alba thought as he nodded.

He saw this bag earlier and had thought to himself it looked similar to something. It was really simple. Why hadn't he noticed it sooner?

The cube was too large to be called a bag. Didn't it look exactly like the box that contains demons straight from mythology?

Thus, an unknown black creature materialized from the box, black thorny tentacles reached out and grabbed Cornelius Alba.

The creature pulled him straight into the box, starting from his feet he was chewed upwards by thousands of small mouths. There were crunching sounds as he was being eaten alive. Just before he was annihilated, when everything below his neck was gone, he made eye contact with the Puppeteer who was looking down at him with a detached gaze.

As I die this horrific death she's watching me, her eyes filling with ridicule.

That alone made him regret that there was no way he could have competed with her.

He recalled his last exchange of words with Araya. Araya must have anticipated this is what would happen to Cornelius Alba.

As the last fragments of brain were being chewed.

... I failed.

I shouldn't have gotten involved with such monsters.

–Those were the last thoughts of the red coated Magus.

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The elevator was going up.

Alone in the small enclosure, Enjou Tomoe was leaning against the wall staring into empty space.

His breathing was ragged.

His one arm had fallen off by itself. His nerves informed him of the maddening pain caused by burning the wound to stop the bleeding. His mind saw the truth he had been trying to avoid, he had become incoherent and didn't know what he was thinking anymore.

Tomoe had no thoughts, the only thing he knew was that his body and mind were trying to break through their limits.

As the elevator went upward, he repeatedly took deep breaths to try and regain his composure.

The elevator he should have been used to using felt unusually slow today. The elevator was irritatingly slow as it moved to the tenth floor.

On the way up, Tomoe let go of the katana in his hand.

Clang, then the Japanese sword laid on the elevator floor.

He thought that the katana was heavier than he expected, his arm was numb after holding it for just a few minutes. If he still had two arms he could have swung it around, but now with one arm he couldn't even draw the katana from its scabbard. Since he only had one arm he thought he was going to fare better with only a knife. He tightened his grip on it firmly with his remaining right arm.

The elevator stopped.

He arrived on the tenth floor.

The doors on both sides opened, through them Tomoe went out into the lobby.

The west tower was before his eyes... No, it was the hallway to the east tower, in a blind spot on elevator's reverse side was the hallway to the west tower.

Tomoe was without light, he went toward the neglected west tower where the real remains were.

He circled around to the elevator's reverse side, through the corridor that wrapped around the outer circumference of the apartment complex.

Soon, it would be eleven o'clock at night.

The night view from the corridor was quiet, and lonely. The only apartment complexes surrounding this one had the same shape and form to each other. Between the apartment complexes were asphalt roads, and green gardens dotted the landscape.

The appearance made him think more of a flock of gravestones surrounded by greenery than a night view.

Phew, he exhaled deeply.

His focus had been aimed at the night view below, but he certainly felt the character who manifested just now.

He took a large breath to collect his disarrayed mind.

Tomoe gripped the knife, then he turned to the corridor which made a gentle semicircle.

The lights were off in the passageway and it was dark, even the moonlight was feeble.

At a spot two rooms down from Tomoe there was a black cloaked silhouette.

Just from the shadow he understood, the man had a large build and tall stature.

His facial expression was engraved with a tinge of anguish, like it would never fade.

The Magus, Araya Souren was there.

Enjou Tomoe froze the moment he confronted the Magus.

The breathing that had been so erratic, the body that had been in so much pain; it got quiet as if it was the end.

The opponent standing before his eyes was overwhelmingly horrifying, even his consciousness froze.

He couldn't do anything.

But he was rather grateful. Until now his mind had been in such a state of disorder that it felt like it was in a thousand pieces, but now it was beautifully clear.

"Araya."

Standing before the absolute being that was Araya, Tomoe had completely lost his freedom. He shouldn't have been able to do anything, nevertheless he had given words.

To exchange words was a sign that they were equals. The fact that he was now as he used to be made the Magus's look cloud over even more sternly.

"Why did you return?" the Magus asked with a heavy voice.

Tomoe wasn't able to answer, he just kept staring at Araya. There was no room for his answer. If he didn't squeeze out all of his energy, it wouldn't be possible to face off against this Magus.

"There is no place for you here. A substitute for Enjou Tomoe has been prepared. You are the one who escaped this spiral. There is no meaning in returning once more." The Magus continued inquiring, his eyes had no light in them.

... Tomoe thought that he had indeed run away from here.

But he came back. For what purpose? Well, the first time he was taken here by Ryougi. And now, most likely–

"Did you come here in order to save Ryougi Shiki? How foolish. That heart of yours does not belong to Enjou Tomoe. But if you're still unaware, you're a puppet in the end. If you deviate from this spiral can you still function normally?"

"Huh...?"

"You certainly did escape out of the spiral. But after that, I knew you would commit suicide. Those who are killed by their family, die because of their family. You escaped from your own home in despair. If I had left you abandoned as you were you would have died. However, that would have leaked your abnormality to the outside world. As a result, I decided to make use of you by giving you a different role. As a different Enjou Tomoe from the original Enjou Tomoe who would have died tonight. A different role, do you understand?"

Tomoe tried to shout "That's a lie!" But he was unable to voice it and he just stood there.

The Magus's expression did not change, his eyeballs just distorted in mockery.

"That's right. This was a low stakes bet for me. I was planing to invite her here, but it's for the best if the mystery is maintained. Enjou Tomoe, you do not know me and have no connection to me, if you brought Ryougi Shiki to me on your own then that was the best outcome. I didn't have any expectations for you, but you pulled it off beautifully. I let you escape as a reward, but I never thought you would come back once more. How extremely arrogant. You were not attracted to Ryougi Shiki of your own will. There was only one truth I added to you after you ran away. That's to feel interest in Ryougi Shiki, it was an unconscious imprinting."

The strength in Enjou Tomoe's legs was draining away.

There was no way he could refute what Araya had said.

Because it was true. Up to now he had never really loved someone before, why was it only Ryougi Shiki that he had so much interest in? From his first time meeting her, it felt like something had ordered him: observe that girl, make a connection with that girl.

"Do you understand? You did not make any of your decisions by your own will. You just brought Ryougi Shiki to me as I intended. Also, your body only has the memory of a day spent in my world. No memories from before this day exist and no memories after it do either. Your will was born from an illusion, and was kept alive by an illusion. In this world Enjou Tomoe met his end, he can only live here now. As a result there's nothing you can do. Since you can't do anything, I let you play the role of calling Ryougi out. If you cannot do anything of your own will, nothing you do will be an obstacle for me."

The Magus's speech was a spell of its own.

Tomoe rapidly remembered. Because he was manufactured he only had the memories of one day that could have happened in this apartment complex, and he was relying on those memories to create illusions of the past and future.

His feelings for Ryougi Shiki, his feelings for his dead parents; everything was just a forgery from what he was now. They were not the feelings of the person who had had been born as Enjou Tomoe.

They were just the feelings of the person who was in the play for one day, they were too vague and without the time to give them meaning.

... Were they truly the real thing?

From the beginning his existence as a person was impossible. And now that he had escaped this spiral he didn't have anywhere he belonged.

"You're fake and can only be an imitation after all. It's not even worth giving you last rights. Wherever you go you'll disappear."

Having said what he needed to, the Magus entirely lost interest in this Enjou Tomoe.

Araya turned his gaze away from Tomoe.

Although he should have had all meaning destroyed, a smile crossed his face as he stared at the Magus.

"... Surely, Araya, it doesn't really matter does it?"

That was him just acting tough, but it was such an extremely pure show of strength that it could just be enough to have put a crack the Magus's steel heart.

"... In front of someone like you, I finally understand. I have been wrong all along, like you I couldn't admit my weakness. But, there's no such thing as fake. Real and fake are just things that are eventually decided later aren't they? You say it's just for a day – since this body is Enjou Tomoe, I'm connected to Enjou Tomoe's real past. I have no past, but I have the same strong feelings Tomoe does. So it's alright."

Crunch, then the sound of gritting teeth could be heard. It was an audible ring of the power Tomoe had; a strong will to challenge him.

"... I, I love Ryougi! I don't know the reason. I didn't leave anything behind, but I enjoyed being with her, just spending time together was fun. So, if you say you gave me that opportunity, I'll at least thank you."

Now, confronting the Magus in the truest sense, Tomoe clicked his tongue.

... I love her, huh? Even now I'm attracted to her. Always, always thinking of her will soothe my rough heart.

Tomoe thought that this must have been what it meant to be in love, then he clicked his tongue.

Because even though I think of Shiki like this, she wasn't my top priority right now.

The reason I came here wasn't to save Ryougi.

I remembered that Kokutou guy taking me to see my old home. I thought about the past I was never supposed to know, those are the days the soul of Enjou Tomoe will never forget.

The reason I came here was for atonement. I have to do the things that Enjou Tomoe would've done.

"Sorry, Ryougi. I'm not dying for you. I have to put my life on the line for myself." He muttered and apologized.

Tomoe erased the memory of the young lady called Ryougi Shiki from his thoughts.

"Am I a fake, Araya?"

The words contained such a strong will that the Magus's brow knit in anger.

"There's no further need to talk." The Magus replied with obvious contempt.

Tomoe nodded honestly. "Perhaps," he thought.

There was no hesitation.

It was obvious he was there as an equal to the Magus.

"Does a mere puppet think he's enlightened? That's nothing more than self-delusion. If you gaze into a clear mirror or motionless water, they will always reflect the truth that you're a fake."

"Yeah. And yet, this heart is real."

The calm words echoed like the night's wind.

The Magus raised one hand. The man known as Araya Souren's posture, where he had one hand outstretched before him, meant he recognized his opponent as someone to annihilate.

Tomoe saw it and desperately tried to control his clattering teeth.

..... Tomoe thought he would be killed for sure.

Nevertheless, he had to take a shot at getting retribution against his opponent. Not because he wanted to die, but because Enjou Tomoe had to get revenge against Araya Souren.

For his parents who he had neglected so far.

For those who were still dying in this world even now.

This was not a suicidal attack in search of an honorable death. He didn't want to die, but even so, there are some things you have to do even if you know they'll kill you.

–As Enjou Tomoe, I decided to start running.

Yes, no matter how painful it was.

Like a turning clock. Like the changing seasons. I couldn't remain in the same place forever.

Because my thoughts were here.

Was it a dream this body was seeing? Was it a dream I was seeing? But this body was fake. The will that Enjou Tomoe possessed. The will that Enjou Tomoe had dwelling within was the real thing.

For this reason–

"Araya, I'm going to kill you!"

Gripping the knife, Enjou Tomoe ran, not for anyone else's sake.

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Enjou Tomoe had one aim, Araya Souren's heart.

The center of the Magus's chest; which Shiki had previously stabbed without hesitation. If he could thrust his knife there he might be able to defeat this monster.

Enjou Tomoe ran trusting this was the best path forward.

His distance from the Magus was the same as that time with Shiki, about six meters. He ran through this distance at full speed.

As he closed in on the Magus, he focused all of his attention on his feet kicking off the floor. They were moving more rapidly than they did during the sprints he had repeated over and over back in the schoolyard.

A circular line emerged around the perimeter of the Magus.

Maybe it was because he underestimated Enjou Tomoe? Tomoe's mind only registered one line, not three like that time with Shiki.

The line covered an area of about one meter, just before the Magus.

Enjou Tomoe didn't know of a way to avoid it.

So he confronted it directly.

His body suddenly came to a stop. The toes that were kicking off the ground lost their power.

There was nothing he could do, really.

The Magus's face was still wholly covered in anguish as he took a step forward.

With a slowness that seems to say this result was obvious, he moved closer to the motionless Enjou Tomoe.

The arm protruding before him slowly stretched out to grab Enjou Tomoe's head.

Enjou Tomoe closed his eyes thinking, "Of course it was hopeless."

But... When his vision went dark, his memories flooded back. The memories of the last month exploded forth, memories that the original Enjou Tomoe had never experienced. Truly the body that was here was Tomoe.

"Here–"

Enjou Tomoe's body gathered strength.

He put all his spirit into his feet which were planted on the ground.

"I don't care even if my legs are torn off," he thought.

It couldn't end like this.

I was not worthless.

"Because I was here."

He shot forth.

One leg had broken with a loud sound.

Thanks to that, he started collapsing forward allowing him to move.

Dodging the outstretched arm of the Magus, Araya's defenseless chest was within reach.

Tomoe shouted.

"That's right, our family wasn't a good one. But, they weren't bad enough to deserve dying like that. They weren't sinful enough to die like that..!"

His voice was his strength, his arm surged forth.

The knife ran.

Leaving a silver trail, the blade deeply pierced into the Magus's chest.

But that was all that there was to it.

"Fool."

The Magus's voice, along with his strong arm extended.

Enjou Tomoe's head was grabbed very tightly.

"Ryougi's Mystic Eyes do not just see death. There is only meaning if they capture it. You may strike at my death, but you can't strike death if you can't see it."

Creak, the strength in the Magus's arm increased.

Enjou Tomoe's arm had let go of the knife and it fell to the floor.

"I chose you for a reason that I haven't told you yet."

Enjou Tomoe did not respond.

From the time the Magus's arm grasped him, his will to live was snatched away entirely from its roots.

"Listen. There is a phenomenon that is the source of human existence. It's not the karma from a past life, but the reason that lead to the existence of Enjou Tomoe. We call that chaotic impulse 'The Origin.' When you killed your mother and fell into despair, the reason I saved you was because your Origin was so clear."

Enjou Tomoe did not respond.

The Magus lifted his body high, and in a voice that sounded too cold he spoke.

“I will teach you one last thing. You won’t accomplish anything. Because your Origin is Worthlessness.”

The Magus swung his arm.

The body in the form of Enjou Tomoe was completely annihilated with that one swing.

It was shattered into pieces, not even the head remained. As if it had been that way from the beginning, in the same way the Magus had said it, worthless, it turned into dust and disappeared into the void.

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After destroying what had been Enjou Tomoe, the Magus stood still as he stayed in the corridor.

The time was near. It had been half a day since he moved from the body he had been using up to yesterday to his current spare body. Finally, his consciousness felt like it had spread to every corner of this body.

Araya Souren was not like some Puppeteer who had died after preparing a completely identical copy. He still had not experienced death.

His body had rotted away several times over the years, each time this happened he maintained his consciousness and so far continued to live on. Araya Souren was only one person. If this body perished, there would be no refuge next time. Things had to be handled carefully.

However, there was no longer any need to wait. The will of the soul known as Araya Souren had placed this latest of his bodies under his control. The wiring of the Magic Circuits that moved his body extended down to his toes, the Magus had at last sublimated his temporary body into a real one.

The Magus started to take action to fulfill his original purpose.

But before that, he felt something unusual within the apartment complex.

“So you were defeated, Alba.”

He muttered without emotion, then the Magus closed his both of his eyes.

In the unlit corridor Araya put himself into a deep sleep, as if diving to the deepest depths of the ocean.

◇

The Magus had fallen asleep, but his consciousness appeared in front of her, leaving his body on the tenth floor.

Without shape or form, he had an unbroken view of the entire first floor lobby.

... On the first floor in the east building's lobby were Aozaki Touko and the boy called Kokutou Mikiya.

Aozaki Touko was nursing the boy who had fallen down, it appeared that Cornelius Alba was not there.

The Magus thought, "So it turned out just like how I expected it to." Then he nodded.

After confirming the outcome, the Magus began to restore his consciousness to his body on the tenth floor.

However, she held him back from that.

"Where are you going Araya? Peeping is in poor taste."

Like she was able to see the Magus who wasn't there, Aozaki Touko turned around.

She was at the bottom of the stairs. The Magus's formless consciousness was at the top of the stairs. Strangely, the two confronted each other in the same positions as before.

"... I knew you were going to have some way to execute Alba, I didn't know there was another Aozaki Touko. The heart I pierced was unquestionably the real thing, not an artificial object. Then, you're an imitation?"

The voice was only an echo. No, it wasn't really a sound. Araya's words only registered with Aozaki Touko.

At the Magus's words she took a breath.

"Whether it's Alba or you, you both fixate on frivolous things. Things like that don't matter. One was born in the beginning and one was born next, that's all there is to it. There's no more than one or two differences so don't make it an issue forever."

"That impudent talk, so it really is you? Then will you oppose me again?"

"No way, I have no chance of winning in this apartment complex."

Her answer was absolute, she looked away from the Magus's consciousness.

For her, treating the boy's wounds was more important than her dialogue with Araya Souren, she took bandages out from under her coat and skillfully applied them to both of the boy's knees.

"Are you sure? The monster in that box might be able to defeat me."

"I refuse. This guy's endless, if I let him go carelessly this entire apartment complex itself could disappear. If I did something so flashy the Association would not stay silent. This time, I'd be in a position to be pursued by the Association. I went through a lot of trouble to disappear, so I'm not going to do anything that'll get me found by those guys."

Although she answered the voice of the Magus she was still looking away.

"I was defeated in this matter as soon as I was killed. At this point I have no intention to interfere. Whether you remove Shiki's brain or settle inside the empty shell, do as you like. If there's anyone who will prevent you from doing so, it surely won't be me."

"Are you still relying on The Counter Force at this point? But I told you that won't take effect."

She shook her head. Rather than denial, the feeling was more of a tinge of pity.

"That's right, The Counter Force won't work anymore. Then, this time you might really succeed. You hate the existence of humans, so when you touch The Root I don't know what the outcome will be. Most magi who touch The Root would go to the Outside of the World afterwards, they would forget about the world we're in. But you're different. A shadow would certainly remain on our side; would this country disappear as a result? If a misanthrope like you is serious about saving people, the only way it could happen is reaching death after an immense amount of suffering.

"But Araya, you don't hate humans. You love your ideal image of a human that exists within you. That's why you can't forgive all the ugly suffering of this world. To save people? Hah! Don't make me laugh. You don't want to save people. You only want to save the ideal image of humanity that exists in the mind of Araya Souren."

The Magus did not respond to her words.

The connection between the two, for real this time, was completely cut off without a single trace of doubt.

"You need not tell me. After all, salvation is nothing more than a single fixation. Farewell Aozaki. When I touch The Root there is no definitive proof I'll remain myself. In the end, I believe that it held meaning that you were the one who opposed me."

The Magus's consciousness started to leave.

She turned her eyes away to see him leave, but suddenly a question came to her.

"Wait Araya. I have one question. The original purpose of this apartment complex is to represent the Taiji in order to take in the Taiji, wasn't it?"

"Indeed. I created this alien world to completely cut off Ryougi Shiki from the outside world. The other various functions are just accessories."

At the Magus's composed answer she laughed weakly. "Ha–Hahaha."

"What..?"

The Magus's voice was aggravated at her laughter.

Aozaki Touko, unable to hold it in any longer, started laughing loudly.

"I see, this building is one big spell! After capturing Shiki, this closed world was meant to make sure that the Association and me, and even the world, was unaware of it. In other words, it's a cage. If someone tried to kill Shiki for a purpose like yours, then the world would surely set The Counter Force in motion. This other world was created to hide the fact that Shiki was imprisoned. That much is fine. But the irony is that, Araya, you made a big mistake at the end."

There was no voice from the Magus.

Even after hearing her words, the Magus still couldn't grasp her real intentions.

The Magus was confused... He kept trying, but he couldn't think of the big mistake she was talking about.

"I made no mistake."

Who could say there was any doubt with that voice of assertion?

She replied while trying to kill her laughter.

"Sure, you didn't make a mistake. For you as a Magus, this is the best solution. But, what if the assumption itself is a mistake? You isolated Shiki? Not in a room somewhere in this apartment complex, but you isolated her in this apartment complex itself? A Bounded Field that achieves spacial isolation is already on the level of Magic. It's a miracle that only a Bounded Field expert like you could create.

"Those who are trapped by the sealed space of a Mobius Ring can never get out from the inside. A closed world that's enclosed by walls can't be destroyed by physical impacts, it's a cage that's impossible to escape from. You slapped Shiki in there, which gave you peace of mind.

"That's certainly perfect. But something like that won't work against her. Just as Magecraft is omnipotent in civilized society, she is in opposition to people like us who live by concepts. We're a threat against common sense, but Shiki is Death for the absurd. You should've already experienced that."

At her words, the Magus's consciousness had frozen.

Surely Ryougi Shiki, who saw death, was an unusual existence. However, there were many people in the world who had the ability to kill people. If it were just about killing living creatures, there was no way to beat the various modern weapons that civilization has produced.

That's right. What makes Ryougi Shiki's nature so different from Magi like them, was definitely not something like that. Her real nature is the ultimate nothingness that kills things that can't be killed, even formless concepts.

"The thing that causes death." That is the ability of Ryougi Shiki.

No weapon could interfere with a sealed world where the space was chained together infinitely with no exit. Because it had no shape, physical weapons that can only interact with physical objects couldn't clash with it. But, Ryougi Shiki's power was precisely one that targeted such formless things.

Then..?

"Yes, if you wanted to imprison Shiki, you should've trapped her in a box made of concrete. If Shiki only had the physical strength of a young lady, all you had to do was simply prepare a hidden room enclosed by iron walls. But Araya Souren. You are a Magus, therefore you treat Magecraft as an absolute. Closing off space is meaningless. You used something ambiguous like that, but she can easily cut through that thing."

She had her face turned away, but now she turned towards the Magus.

Before he could understand the expression in her eyes, the Magus's consciousness was abruptly pulled back to his original body.

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The Magus returned to his physical body feeling something was abnormal within himself.

His body was cold and his fingertips were numb.

There was sweat on his forehead.

Some of his internal organs had stopped functioning and were signaling danger.

"... I was... cut?"

The Magus growled faintly, he couldn't believe it.

But it was true.

Just now, in this apartment complex, which could be said to be Araya Souren himself, something had been cleanly severed somewhere.

As easy as cutting through butter, without hesitation, the space itself had been cleanly cut off.

Just as the Magus's consciousness controlled his own body, he had also attuned the activity of the apartment complex with his own consciousness.

This building was inside of his body. The electric wiring was like his nerves, and the water piping was an equivalent to his blood vessels. The pain from his body being cleanly cut inside was not something he could ignore.

As if to prove that point, the Magus's focus on his consciousness was broken by the pain, and he was forced from the first floor lobby up to his physical body in the tenth floor hallway... As if he were pulled by a giant's arms, he was forced to return and could not resist.

"... What is... this?"

Muttering, he wiped the sweat off his forehead with one hand.

As though a spider was running down his spine, he felt a chill permeate his internal organs.

For the first time in hundreds of years he remembered that this was what nausea felt like.

"What are you afraid of, Araya Souren?"

The Magus berated himself for his own weakness.

But, the abnormalities in his body didn't stop.

The power that had run across every corner of his body just a few moments ago, was now gone. *Bzzt, bzzt.* The Magic Circuits that send commands for his body to move began to disconnect starting from his fingertips.

–Death was drawing near.

Brrrrrrrrrrrrmmmmmmmm.

Suddenly, he heard a sound.

At the end of the corridor, the sound of the vibration reverberating through the lobby was unmistakably the elevator moving.

Something was ascending. Soon the sound ceased and there was a sign that the door had opened.

Light, dry sounds then echoed through the lobby. It was the sound of geta sandals walking on the hard floor.

Click-clack, the sound of the footsteps approached.

The Magus turned his body in the direction of the lobby.

Araya knew the person who would turn up here soon. He accepted it even though it was hard to believe.

The figure appeared suddenly.

With the light from the lobby behind, the shape only looked like a shadow.

A beautiful ghostly white kimono.

Shiny black hair that looked as if it was wet, and pure black eyes that had a blue hue.

She had a katana in her hand.

In the darkness of the night, the katana was easily pulled out of its scabbard. With a casually unsheathed katana held in one hand, she resembled a samurai standing on the battlefield.

With both a sense of perfect tranquility and the presence of death, Ryougi Shiki had arrived.

17/

Shiki walked until she stepped into the passageway of the apartment building; she stopped there.

She held her katana in one hand and pointed it towards the floor, there was some distance between them as the black Magus came into her view.

The distance between them was three rooms – about ten meters.

“I don’t understand – how did you break through, Ryougi Shiki!”

The Magus spoke with his face full of anguish.

It was a question that kept repeating itself in his mind. The black Magus, Araya Souren, already knew the answer, but he continued to ask the question.

He had sufficient awareness to understand how she escaped the imprisoned space. Last night, the young lady had lost consciousness after several of her ribs were shattered by the Magus’s blow.

She had just recently awakened within the closed space, in the boundary set between the walls of the apartment complex. Within that impossible space she slashed through the impossible wall.

Infinity is not「 」. For infinity to remain infinite, the finite has to be defined. Without the finite there cannot exist infinity. Because things have an end, we can observe the thing called infinity. Ryougi Shiki had been cast into infinity, she saw the impossible finite and cut through it.

Of course, there is no finite inside of the infinite. You can’t slash through what doesn’t exist, so escape from such a cage is impossible. But, if there is no finite then there is no infinite. Whether finite walls exist or not, an endless world holds no meaning before Ryougi Shiki.

If there really is no finite, then it’s not infinite but「 」. If the finite can be comprehended, Shiki could detect and slash through it.

... The black hole that should have been absolute was just a small dark room to his opponent. The Magus felt ashamed of himself.

"But, there must be a cause. The wounds I've inflicted have yet to heal. How can you move in that body? Why did you wake up even though you had those wounds? Why weren't you unconscious for a few more minutes?"

The Magus's facial expression was still full of anguish and his voice grew more aggravated.

That's right, even if the Bounded Field was meaningless there wouldn't have been a problem if Shiki had remained unconscious.

Just a few more minutes.

If there had only been a few more minutes before Shiki woke up, it would have been over.

This woman had woken up just now. There were no external factors. Perhaps, Shiki awoke from her sleep naturally and it was a completely mundane awakening. Then she found herself imprisoned and didn't hesitate to cut through the wall.

If one were to say anything, all that could be said was that it was bad luck.

Did the telepathic communication with Aozaki Touko take a lot of time? No, that conversation only lasted for a moment.

In that case, where was the extra time?

The Magus thought back, then knitted his eyebrows in displeasure.

He glanced at his palm. That was the arm that had crushed the thing called Enjou Tomoe a few minutes earlier. It had just been a few minutes, but those few minutes made all the difference. If only he hadn't spent so much time, perhaps–

"Enjou... Tomoe, huh?"

The words he had spit out were filled with deep resentment.

However, Ryougi Shiki denied it, saying Enjou Tomoe was unrelated to her waking up.

"I woke up on my own. I didn't get help from anyone. There was no reason for Enjou to come here."

Shiki spoke in a quiet voice.

The night breeze rustled her hair, shaking it slightly.

"But Enjou is the one who brought your ruin. I'll tell you that much."

At Shiki's words the Magus's eyes narrowed.

Ryougi Shiki said it was Enjou Tomoe who had brought Araya Souren's ruin.

That was definitively not the case. If there was a primary factor that had led to his ruin, he thought it would have to have been either Ryougi Shiki or Aozaki Touko.

That puppet who had been manipulated could never be the primary factor, definitely not.

"Complete nonsense. That thing accomplished nothing. Even bringing you here was just a role given to it. It was just a puppet."

"Yeah, that guy didn't do anything, he couldn't do anything. But, you *never intended to use him as a puppet in the beginning*."

"Mm." The Magus hesitated in replying.

"Indeed," then Araya thought.

When Enjou Tomoe had escaped from his everyday life, Araya thought he could make use of him. By making use of the unforeseen irregularity, he had continued with his plans without giving rise to any disruptions.

However, that... was not a part of the plan Araya had from the beginning. It had been a secondary plan that came into being because Enjou Tomoe had gotten out. That meant he was able to accomplish something, didn't it?

It was a plan that was supposed to end everything here without anyone noticing, and it had been disrupted, even by such a minor event.

Shiki then spoke.

"You saw the discrepancy that guy caused in your plan, and decided it was a good idea to make use of him. But, by that point you were already unraveling. That guy, Enjou Tomoe, by the time he got out of this spiral he had already made an impact."

And then, she took one step forward.

Her footwork was so purposeful that the Magus couldn't bring himself to lift one hand.

The Magus knew something was different as he looked at the young lady in the white kimono.

Surely, Shiki's current disposition was different from last night. Knowing Enjou Tomoe was already, destroyed she might hate Araya Souren.

However, such a change was trivial. An individual's abilities wouldn't simply change just because of changes in their emotions.

Nevertheless, the Magus sensed the opponent standing before him was something different from last night.

The young lady took step after step.

There was no enthusiasm in her walk, it was a natural stride. In the midst of it, with a bored expression Shiki opened her mouth.

"Yeah, I don't care about you. But I don't want to deal with any more trouble down the road, so I'm going to kill you here."

Shiki gave a sleepy look, without presence.

"But this is the first time for this. I'm not happy at all. Even with my prey before me, my heart isn't racing. I know we could have a close match and try to kill each other, I could almost laugh."

Clang, the katana in Shiki's hand creaked.

It was the sound of her loose grip tightening on the katana's handle.

While walking, Shiki quietly brought the katana in front of her... to a position at waist height.

The Magus slowly raised one hand. Immediately, three circles were drawn around him.

"... Very well. Capturing you alive was not something I should have desired from the beginning. Things haven't changed. You won't reanimate very well, but I'll remove your head and substitute it with my own. I will die, but if I can touch The Root then this life is..."

Not responding to the Magus's words, Shiki kept walking forward.

The distance between the two of them gradually narrowed.

The Magus's three Bounded Fields had a diameter of four meters. Shiki was only two meters away approaching its outer circumference.

The murderous intent coming from Shiki changed the winter night's air into a hot summer wind.

Quietly, this murderous intent flowed throughout the corridor, it felt like the Magus's skin was being grilled.

... But, still.

The Magus knew he would not be defeated by Shiki.

He understood that the katana she held in her hands was a famed katana that had withstood several centuries. Even taking that into consideration, Shiki's combat techniques could not match his own. If he wasn't thinking of capturing her alive, Araya Souren was confident he could dispose of Shiki without her getting close to him.

Shiki stepped up to the Bounded Field, stopping her feet exactly at the edge.

Up to now she had been holding her katana with one hand, she gently placed her other hand on the handle.

The center of gravity in her waist lowered slightly. With her stance, the handle of her katana was fixed in front of her abdomen and the blade was gently tilted towards the enemy before her.

Her stance was Seigan, the most widely practiced of the many schools of swordsmanship, a battle stance that has a reputation for being basic and one of the strongest.

Shiki thereupon confronted the Magus without change, she slowly closed her sleepy eyes and nodded in understanding.

"Oh, I get it. It's because I don't want to kill you. I just can't stand your existence."

... That was surely the feeling she had towards her opponent who had killed Tomoe.

The murderous intent that had only been pointed so far, now became a blade that pierced the Magus's whole body.

That was the signal for the battle, the back and forth would last for only a fleeting moment.

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"*Kah*!" Shiki opened both of her eyes.

The Magus put strength into his protruding arm.

At that time.

Araya was not motivated by his fighting spirit, but Araya innately knew from fear that he had to kill Shiki.

"—Shuku!"

Araya's angry roar was like a magical arm crushing the space with no hesitation. He glared at the space surrounding Shiki and then tried to crush the scene before him. There was absolutely no delay at all.

The moment he shouted and tightly clasped his hand, Shiki's defeat should have been determined.

However.

Araya saw it.

Strangely to Araya's sight, the girl who was initially moving slower than his shout was now acting faster than his yell.

Both arms holding her katana jumped up. It was so fast that it gave the illusion of a flash of light. The katana she posted overhead was then swung down with even greater speed.

The shout of, *Shuku*,

was bisected by the sound of her blade, *zan*.

The distortion of space right in front of her should have crushed Shiki, but the entire distortion was "killed".

The Magus put strength in his arm again.

All he had to do was open the palm of his hand and clasp it again. That's all he had to do, but...

It was too late; before he could, Ryougi Shiki had already started sprinting.

"———"

Araya didn't make a sound and not able to think in time, he accepted the blow.

Ryougi Shiki had literally shot forth like a bullet.

She drew near to the Magus to land a blow, staying in the stance she had while cutting through the distortion.

Ryougi Shiki's katana cleaved in a straight horizontal line before taking a step forward.

The Bounded Field the Magus had relied on dispersed.

... If it were only the outer perimeter, Araya was ready to let it be killed in one blow. Even if she got close, he intended to use the moment when, Shiki was focused on killing the second layer, to decide the match.

However with just one swing, she simultaneously annihilated two Bounded Fields outside of her range.

She took a step forward again.

If she swung her katana at such extreme speed, then what was the speed of her footwork?

With only one step, Ryougi Shiki reduced the distance between them from four meters to zero.

Her body was flowing. The first step she took was simultaneously a step forward and a step towards unleashing a deadly slash. Her body was so quick, it felt more like time was going backwards rather than coming to a stop.

The deadly slash made a run at him.

The Magus jumped backward.

Ryougi Shiki looked at the Magus with her sword still in the swinging position. A single line of fresh blood spilled out from her lips. She herself had not received a wound. However, it was just the wounds from last night reopening. Ryougi Shiki's body had a few broken ribs and some organ damage; just walking caused regurgitated blood to flow out of her mouth.

Even with such wounds, she still unveiled an impressive dance with her blade.

The Magus's right arm fell off as he jumped out of the way. No, not just his arm. Everything diagonally from the top of his shoulder to his chest had been cut off and fell to the floor.

The Magus had jumped back after he had been completely cut through. It didn't even register to him that he had been cut.

"–Who, are you?"

Ignoring his own wounds, the Magus stared at the opponent before him.

... That blow just now surely would have been fatal. If Shiki's second deadly slash had killed three Bounded Fields instead of two then Araya's body would have been bisected in half at the torso.

Fugu, the Magus's first Bounded Field protected the most immediate surroundings. Its protection forced her steps to be slightly more shallow allowing the Magus to escape a fatal wound.

No, that wasn't the thing that was surprising.

Shiki was completely different from last night.

Was she showing more strength than usual because she was angry about Enjou Tomoe's death? No, that absolutely could not be the case.

The Magus gazed at the young lady in the white kimono.

Ryougi Shiki corrected her posture, the katana she held with both hands she now held with one hand. With that, the young lady was back to the girl she was last night.

Cough, drops of blood escaped her mouth as she coughed. If it weren't for the wounds from last night, she might have slashed the Magus without pause and severed his head.

"... What? Is it a difference due to the weapon?"

Araya was shocked.

The reason Shiki had become a different person was simply a method for controlling the will to fight that was trained to the limit.

Long ago, when the Samurai drew their swords, they naturally accepted that they would kill and be killed. It was not because they were prepared for it as warriors. From the moment they gripped the handles of their swords, they were awakened.

As a result their bodies were only suited for killing, as a result their minds were only focused on survival.

It was not just about getting in the right mindset before a match. When they drew their swords their brains changed functions. It wasn't that their bodies switched over to combat mode. It was that their brains changed their bodies for combat.

Thus, the muscles are used in ways no living creature should ever use them, the blood vessels would change the route of circulation they took and and they would even cease breathing normally... Yes, all human functions that were useless in battle would be eliminated, and all parts of them would switch into combat mode.

"That stance. I'm surprised at your transformation through self-suggestion."

The Magus in pain muttered, and the woman in the kimono replied "Yes."

... The moment Shiki opened her eyes, Araya understood the true nature of the anxiety that ran through him. The Magus cursed his own ignorance. He didn't think that there was a family that had passed down this technique to the present day.

It dawned on Araya. For the old style of swordsman who existed in the past, a distance of just five and a half meters was practically nothing. It was likely this Shiki could have closed a distance of about nine meters in a single step.

No one really knew her true nature.

It was assumed that Ryougi Shiki's fighting style used her Mystic Eyes of Death Perception and a knife. But the reality was different. This woman was really a homicidal maniac with a katana in her hand. Compared to what she is now, her usual self was no match.

"I have been deceived. You weren't fighting with your full potential against Asagami Fujino."

In reply to the Magus's words, Ryougi Shiki shook her head "no" in denial.

Her icy eyes told him she was always serious, regardless of the weapon she was using.

Having received that look, the Magus realized something.

Now, what was with this woman's response?

What is this vessel here?

This opponent, when did she stop being Shiki?

"I see... I've finally met you...!"

Holding his wound above his shoulder with his remaining left arm, the Magus roared.

The woman in the white kimono, Ryougi Shiki, gave him the most feminine smile possible.

With that she slashed at the Magus.

Araya had no way to evade that deadly slash.

But even so, this place was within his body. To be defeated here was unthinkable for Araya Souren.

Even if he had to destroy this entire apartment complex, Ryougi Shiki was something he had to obtain now.

Taking a chance, the Magus advanced.

"–Dakatsu...!"

The Magus's voice resounded.

He used his remaining left arm to block Ryougi Shiki's katana. His left arm with the Śarīra embedded inside of it, was still intact. Even for someone like Ryougi Shiki, the blessing of a saint is not an easy thing to cut through.

Simultaneously, his right arm that had been cut off sprung up by itself. The arm slithered like a snake across the floor, and pounced at Ryougi Shiki's neck.

"–tsk!"

The arm's grip was like a vice and it started to strangle Ryougi Shiki.

In that small gap, the Magus retreated a step and stuck out his left arm.

"Shuku!" The palm of his hand compressed the space.

The shock from every direction flooded Ryougi Shiki's body with a force strong enough to break every bone in her body.

"Ah." A voice that was in its death throes escaped from her.

The young lady in the white kimono crumpled towards the ground.

Or rather, she was about to fall.

–Ryougi Shiki disappeared in an instant.

However, Shiki didn't want to let her opponent get away.

Her consciousness was almost certainly fading away, but the white shape sprung upwards.

She simply directed her Death Perception towards the shape of Araya Souren and cut through it.

The katana was swung a single time.

The katana pierced the center of the Magus's chest.

Splat, the sensation of his life being drained away caused the Magus to recoil in disgust.

"Fool!"

Unbelievably, at the same time Araya kicked Shiki.

The mid level kick was like a spear directed at Shiki's stomach.

Shiki avoided it by retreating back with a jump.

Squelch, the blade slipped out of Araya and he realized something.

To stop his opponent–

"Do I have to kill my alien world...!?"

The Magus's left hand opened.

Space compressed for the third time, but it wound down with a slash of Shiki's katana; he stood there entirely shocked.

–The Magus's form, along with his black cloak disappeared.

Shiki didn't think to stop it.

What principle was the Magus using to disappear from this place? And how could she prevent him from doing so? Shiki didn't even consider such small details.

"If you want to run, do as you like." Shiki thought, as she put her hand on the railing in the corridor.

"But, I'll never let you get away."

As it was, she jumped out of the building.

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Araya decided to compress the apartment complex itself.

Ryougi Shiki's body would be smashed by it, but the outward appearance didn't matter. It was sufficient that the body remained intact enough to sustain activity as a human being. He didn't need the head in the first place. Even if the skull was shattered and gray matter was scattered about, that part could simply be replaced with his own head. Her body is what was important. Only that body was connected to The Root.

With his right arm cut off and the center of his chest pierced, this body wouldn't last much longer. If he could reach the Swirl of the Root, the place where everything begins, a physical body would be unnecessary. Until then, all he needed was for his soul and Ryougi Shiki's body to be preserved.

It was the worst possible way it could have gone but in the end what needed to be done was no different. The only thing that has changed was that there was no insurance if the end resulted in failure.

... In any case, if this method was inadequate then he was at a dead end.

Araya thought.

That his own weakness was his fear of failure, and that had been his greatest enemy all along. If he had simply killed Ryougi Shiki from the beginning, he would never have been backed into a corner like this.

Anyhow, the curtain would now fall.

The Magus escaped from the apartment complex within his own body, to the garden outside of his body.

A green lawn enclosed the apartment complex's garden; it was within the Bounded Field but not a part of the apartment complex itself. Even if the building was destroyed, this was the only place that would remain unaffected by the impact.

The Magus suddenly appeared in the garden, without a moment's rest from the spatial transition he stuck out his right arm.

Looking up into the night sky, he spread the palm of his hand to crush the circular tower.

In that moment.

His body was cut at the shoulder.

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In that moment, his body was cut at the shoulder.

"Ryougi... Shiki."

Looking up into the night sky, the Magus muttered.

"You..."

"Gah." Red blood spread as it scattered from the Magus's mouth.

The powdery blood didn't drip to the ground, nor did it wet the face of Ryougi Shiki who had slashed him. Instead it scattered in the wind.

"It can't... be."

Just as he said, he couldn't believe it.

And it was only natural. When the Magus had appeared in the garden and looked up toward the night sky, what was in his field of vision was Ryougi Shiki; she had jumped from the tenth floor.

This opponent, with no hesitation had jumped from the tenth floor corridor just as the Magus had connected the space from the apartment complex to the garden to move through.

He didn't understand what kind of confidence could have led to such an action? There was no way he could have understood.

Even if she really had predicted that the Magus would appear in the garden, who would think of jumping from the tenth floor?

It was beyond reckless, in the end, it could be classified as a miracle.

Jumping from the tenth floor aiming for just one person? How was such a thing any different from dropping a needle from the tenth floor and expecting it to hit a target?

Nevertheless without hesitation his opponent had jumped.

Even while the Magus's form remained on the tenth floor, she jumped towards the Araya Souren who had yet to actually exist and would be standing in the garden.

And the moment the Magus materialized in the garden his body was cut.

He had stuck his left arm out to crush the apartment complex but ended up having to quickly use it as a shield, both it and his body were bisected from his shoulder to his waist. Even with the blessing of the Śarīra embedded in his left arm, his arm was unable to endure the impact of a deadly slash that had a ten story fall behind it.

Shiki's body remained still without having actually reached the ground.

Ironically, one of the Magus's remaining Bounded Fields of stillness was still functioning.

Because she was entangled in it, Shiki's fall had not impacted the ground. Naturally the pressure from falling over forty meters would have worsened her injuries.

Shiki kept her head down.

The katana in her hands bit into the Magus's body and wouldn't let go.

His brow knit in vexation, the anguished expression that covered Araya's face did not change.

"... If you caught me, you were expecting not to crash into the ground? No, that's not it. You would have done the same thing regardless. How unsightly. Araya Souren will not lose to an inexperienced person like you."

It wasn't bravado, those words were his true unclouded conviction.

His left arm was cut off from the shoulder and his right arm had long since been lost.

The Magus who was only just standing stoically, kicked Shiki away.

The kick he made while standing seemed to pierce through the sky and hit Shiki's chest hard.

Shiki's body was shot away and thrown straight onto the garden's grounds.

Even so, Shiki's hand had never let go of her katana, but the blade had remained deeply pierced in the Magus's body.

As a result, the katana's blade broke in two, ending its five hundred year history.

Shiki collapsed in the garden and did not move.

The Magus muttered in displeasure while looking at Shiki who had completely lost consciousness.

"You look like a girl of your age like that."

The Magus was without motion.

The look of anguish that filled the Magus's face grew much more dark.

Though the Magus's goal was right before his eyes, he was unable to move.

The deadly slash just now was the finishing blow.

Honestly, it was an astonishingly nonsensical blow, but at the same time it was as perfect a blow as it could have been. Had he received it, he certainly could only perish right?

“I never thought we’d be trading blows again.”

What was the cause of this?

He moved his attention on his body that refused to move, despite his objective being just before him. He also reflected on his Bounded Field that had stopped Shiki’s body when she had jumped, Araya muttered to himself.

“Those who have their Origin awakened are bound by their Origin, huh? I see; my impulse was ‘*stillness*’.”

The Magus spoke sarcastically, not for anyone else to hear.

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Only the moonlight seemed alive.

Shiki was collapsed on the green lawn, the black clothed Magus stood completely motionless with both arms missing.

Then another Magus approached, her gait was casual as if returning from a walk.

“You failed again, Araya.”

Araya didn’t respond to Touko’s voice.

“What a terrible state you’re in. Collecting the deaths of people, creating hell, and personally experiencing their suffering. Isn’t it just painful? Why do you corner yourself like that? Why do you go so far to reach the Swirl of the Root? It couldn’t seriously be that you dream of saving humanity like you did when you were a Taimitsu Monk, right?”

“My reason is long forgotten.”

With his answer, the black Magus retreated inward.

It has been a story from the distant past. Human beings can’t be saved. As long as they live, there will inevitably be those who remain unrewarded. Not all human beings can find happiness. Then, what is a human being who was not saved? What will be the reward for their lives?

There is no answer. It’s equal to infinite and finite. If no one is saved, then no one can attain salvation. If so, salvation is no different from a gold coin endlessly passing hands.

Human beings can’t be saved. There’s no salvation in the world.

That’s why I decided to record death. To record the end to everything, to record the end of the world, to examine everything from beginning to end. By doing so, perhaps I could distinguish what happiness truly was.

If it were possible to reevaluate everything, from those who were unrewarded to those who were not saved, then perhaps I could determine what could be referred to as happiness. If the meaning of humanity’s happiness could be understood, then after the world ends all those who died meaninglessly could be granted meaning in the end. Therefore, when the world reaches its conclusion, people would finally be able to measure the value of human beings.

That alone, is the one and only universal salvation.

.....

Click, a sound could be heard.

It was the sound of Touko lighting a cigarette, it had pulled Araya's consciousness back from thought.

"You've forgotten your reason? Your hopes are empty, and even your beginning point is zero. So then, what exactly are you?"

"I'm nobody. I just want a conclusion. These ugly, dirty, filthy, ignorant humans. If that's all that'll be left in history after they die off, it could be concluded that the value of humans is in their ugliness. I would be relieved to know that an ugly and hopeless existence is what makes us human."

The two Magi spoke to each other without looking at one another.

Araya stood there motionless, while Touko looked up at the starry sky.

"And that's why you want to touch the Swirl of the Root? Everything is recorded over there. Even if it weren't, you could reduce everything to nothingness. You want to eliminate all the filthy humans for your sake."

"That's right. But there are more steps to take. Just a few more steps, and yet once again the world has obstructed me. If it is impossible to open the path, then one is prevented even from acquiring the vessel that already possesses the path to begin with. How utterly, utterly pathetic. What a- What an inability to give up.

"No one knows the world is in danger, yet everyone subconsciously wants to survive. They drown in pleasure but no one is trying to save the world from breaking down, and yet unconsciously everyone seeks to eliminate things that harm the world. What do you call this paradox? The desire to live taints the prayers to keep living. Those wicked thoughts are my enemy."

His voice contained a deep hatred. Touko let out a sigh.

"The world? That's wrong Araya. It wasn't the human's Counter Force that obstructed you this time. You did really well; the Counter Force didn't come into play. There was just one thing that destroyed Araya Souren. You lost to something as trivial as the familial love of only one person, Enjou Tomoe."

Araya refused to accept it.

He was determined to overcome the will of the whole world and even turn the will of every human being in existence into his enemy. Who would have thought that he would have stumbled over a mere youngster like that?

"Even if that were true. What backed him was the scum, the rabble striving to maintain the age of humanity. It would have been impossible for the original Enjou Tomoe to act as he did. What moved him was not a heart that cared for his family. Such a thing doesn't exist in humans. All they have is their desire to survive. He only wore the ornament of something like familial love to conceal his hideous true feelings. Because he wanted to live, he pretended to protect others."

Araya's words were filled with nothing but hatred.

Touko did not think this man, who insulted humans as filthy, was correct. Araya Souren had lived so long he had become a single concept. Those who didn't change the direction of their thoughts were no longer human.

Even though she knew it was useless, her curse continued to leave her mouth.

"Let me tell you something interesting, Araya. You probably don't know this, but there is something called the collective unconscious that a famous psychologist defined. The idea is that the lowest levels of consciousness inside of all human minds end up in the same lake. *As a former Buddhist monk, this idea should be intimately familiar to you.* This is, in other words, the Counter Force that is not of the Gaia type – but instead is the unified agreement within the unconscious of humans. And you know, Souren. *Generally, it's called Arayashiki.*

"Wha, what?" Said a breathless voice.

The Magus had previously answered her questions thus: My enemy is the thoughts of humanity, the irredeemable nature of human beings. Touko continued on.

That curse – now, here, took on a singular form.

"It's funny isn't it, Araya Souren? You were born with the same last name as the thing you consider your lifelong enemy. Yet you yourself were unaware of it. No one around you taught you about it, and you set your own path preserving that miraculous coincidence. What a malevolent trap this world has laid. Listen, Souren. There were a lot of paradoxes this time, but you the architect were the biggest paradox of all!"

... The curse became the image of an atrocious demon invading Araya's thoughts, eroding them and crushing his existence.

The Magus did not respond. Only the focus of his eyes faded away.

Nevertheless there was no motion; he had a look of anguish on his face. Was that darkness, and that heaviness like that of a philosopher burdened with an eternal and unresolved question?

The Magus didn't deny it, but simply accepted the curse and muttered.

"This body is at its limit."

"Starting over again? How many times has it been? You never learn."

That was the spiral. Araya's sour look didn't break down until the very end.

Touko had a clear look of disdain aimed towards him; she threw away the cigarette she had pinched between her fingers. In the end, she had lit the cigarette but hadn't brought it to her mouth even once.

Though she had disdain for him, she did not hate this Magus, who had become more of a concept.

If she had made one wrong step. No, if she had not made a wrong step she surely would have ended up like this too. Neither a human nor a living being, but merely the embodiment of a theory resulting in a phenomenon.

Now that she thought that, it was sad.

"Gaha", Araya vomited blood.

The body, starting from the left side had begun to disappear and turn to ashes.

"I didn't make any spare bodies. If we are to meet again, it will be in the next generation."

"There will be no such thing as a Magus by then. There won't be a reunion. You will be alone in the end. Even so, you won't stop?"

"Of course, I won't accept defeat."

Touko simply closed her eyes.

This brief exchange of questions, meant to settle the many years they were separated, now came to an end.

As the Magus Aozaki Touko, she asked her final questions for Araya.

"Araya, what do you seek?"

"True wisdom."

The black Magus's arm crumbled away.

"Araya, where do you seek it?"

"Only within myself."

The cloak scattered , and half of his body danced away in the wind.

Aozaki Touko watched it all the way through.

"Araya, where are you trying to reach?"

Araya crumbled apart. Only his mouth was left, the words disappeared without a voice.

–That's obvious. The end of this paradox spiral–

She felt like that was the answer that came back to her.

Averting her eyes from the ashes dancing in the wind, Touko lit one more cigarette.

The tobacco smoke swayed like an impossible mirage.

Paradox/Spiral
(19)

For some reason I was in town.

The weather was very nice today. Looking up, the sky was endlessly blue. The cloudless sky was gentle and the sunlight wasn't harsh.

It must have been because of the dreamy, white, and warm sunlight. The city was somehow blurred like a mirage, and the usual main streets felt as calm as a desert. It had been cloudy every day since November but today was bright, like it was midsummer again.

I was wearing a brand new crimson casual kimono, and went into a coffee shop.

Even I have been going to coffee shops recently.

Perhaps because it was a day like this, but the normally gloomy Ahnenerbe was crowded.

The only light in this coffee shop came from the sunlight shining through the windows, it made this place popular on days where the sun shined strongly like today.

The white sunlight streamed through the large windows onto the plain white tables. The rest of the shop possessed dry black shadows. The combination of light and dark gave the place a church-like solemness, making it a popular spot for meeting up with others.

I was one such person.

There were only two empty tables.

I took a seat.

Then, a teenage boy took a seat at the other table, perhaps he was also waiting to meet someone?

I continued to sit in my chair and wait.

And the guy who had arrived at the same time as me was also waiting.

We sat with our backs facing each other in the warm sunlight.

There was a strange silence.

Apparently, I'm a bit short-tempered. I myself was not aware of it but everyone around me said so, so it must be true. Yet here I was, waiting for someone without any complaints.

I wondered why I was so calm? After thinking about it I answered my own question.

It must be because the guy sitting with his back to me was so engrossed in his waiting.

I felt relieved that there was someone else who was waiting just like me, then I could wait for that guy without complaining.

After a long time, I noticed some idiot waving his hand outside of my window. He must have ran here, since he was really out of breath as he waved. I was a bit worried about whether or not it was okay for him to run when his legs had been recently injured.

Anyway, I thought rather naively that his sense of fashion would have to be changed; he was dressed in black from top to bottom even on a pleasant day like this.

When I looked there was another person waiting outside and waving. It was a woman in a white one-piece dress.

I stood up from my seat.

The guy at my back also stood up from his seat at the same time.

... I could be at peace now. It seemed like the woman in the one-piece dress was the person he was waiting for. I somehow felt relieved as I stepped towards the shop's exit.

Strangely enough, this shop had two exits.

One at the east end and another at the west, like a parting road.

I stepped towards the west exit and the guy stepped towards the east exit.

While leaving the store, I looked back only once.

And he looked back in the same way.

He had red hair and a slender build like a woman's.

When he met my eyes, he looked away and raised one hand.

He was a stranger, but I guess this was some kind of fate.

I raised one hand in response.

We stood at separate exits and exchanged these farewells.

It looked as if the guy had said, "See you later," but I didn't hear his voice at all.

"See you later," I also responded and then left the shop.

Outside the weather was beautiful; it made everything that happened so far feel like a dream.

I felt like I was melting away in the strong sunlight, I stepped towards someone who was waving his hand at me.

Somehow I was really happy, and yet, I was also somewhat wistful.

The white sunlight was so strong I couldn't see the person waving his hand at me.

The red haired guy had a place to walk to like this, and for it I thanked some non-existent God.

Really, how unsightly.

I'm sure it was because Ahnenerbe felt like a church that I ended up indulging in such a whim.

Looking back, there was no church there. There was just a horizon as flat as a desert.

See, nothing remained behind. But I had already been prepared for that.

I think that's what life is, "nothing is left behind."

But I'm sure someone would say that life is all about making sure you don't leave anything behind.

Ding-dong. The sound of the doorbell rang.

Hearing that sound, I realized this couldn't be anything but a dream.

From a town as beautiful as a desert, I seamlessly woke up from my sleep–

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Listening to the doorbell ring a few times had made me sit up in my bed.

I looked at the clock and saw it was just after nine in the morning. Last night, I had taken my usual evening walk and fell asleep at five in the morning. That was probably not enough sleep.

The doorbell was still ringing.

That continued insistence that I'm here is undoubtedly Mikiya's.

I sat in bed with only my upper body raised, while my consciousness drifted aimlessly.

... It was because of that strange dream.

For some reason, I wasn't in the mood to meet Mikiya.

I hugged the pillow roughly and just laid back down.

And, suddenly the bell stopped.

"Now what? That wimp."

I muttered, and pulled the blanket back over myself.

I really was motivated to go back to sleep now.

However my opponent used extreme force.

Click, I heard the sound of a key opening a lock.

Surprised, I tried to get out of bed, but it was too late.

"I'm coming in..... You're awake right? Shiki."

Kokutou Mikiya came in on his own accord. He greeted me with a plastic bag from a convenience store in one hand.

I found myself glaring at Kokutou Mikiya due to his calm demeanor and wondering why he had a key to my room.

“What? Don’t be so greedy. I skipped my morning meal too, I’m not giving it to you.”

... Mikiya hid the plastic bag behind his back to protect it.

His completely irrelevant comment only made me angrier.

“What’s this, you trespasser. I don’t want any of that retort pouch food even if you ask me.”

“That’s good. Today I can have a peaceful breakfast then. You finally cured yourself of your habit of stealing other people’s things.”

As he spoke, Mikiya laid out various kinds of food on the floor.

Looking at his happy expression from the side, I realized the time passing us by.

... Had it been about two weeks since then?

I had serious injuries that were supposed to require a week to heal, Mikiya had to go to the hospital for light injuries to his legs.

My injuries were far more severe, but my body seems more durable than most and I completely healed from my wounds within a week.

However, Mikiya still had to go to the hospital. He could walk and run but he was warned by his doctor to avoid running as much as possible. Mikiya had non-nonchalantly said that the warning wasn’t just for now but would continue even after he had recovered.

We had not even once talked about what happened at that apartment complex. It didn’t feel necessary to me. However, Mikiya occasionally had a dark expression on his face. I guess he had his own concerns.

As for me, I hadn’t really been carrying any scars from it.

At least, I understood I should probably have felt sorrow. Even though my roommate who had only been with me for a month was gone, my daily life hadn’t changed much.

To me it was just a little irritating.

“Hey...”

Mikiya talked with his back to me, holding disposable chopsticks in one hand.

With a voice that had no emotion I replied, “What?”

“Yeah, about that apartment complex. I heard from Touko-san that it’s going to be demolished.”

“I see. But isn’t that going to cause various problems? Like with the residents and such.”

“There’s no need to worry about that. There’s a rule that Magi must take care of another Magus’s mess, so people from the Association came and took care of everything. The falsified residents were moved to somewhere else as falsified residents, the basement was completely torched, and they made it all look like nothing ever happened. I guess it’s called destroying the evidence. The demolition is starting today, at noon.”

That must have been what Mikiya came here to say.

I had no intention to watch the demolition, and neither did Mikiya.

Even so, I guess Mikiya wanted to tell me before it was demolished.

“That was quick.”

Mikiya agreed with my sincere muttering.

With that, we stopped talking about the apartment complex.

“But this is the end of the events surrounding Shiki. I wasn’t really involved this time, so I don’t know the details but the trouble should end now right? If so, then you need to go to school properly after this. If you don’t advance to the next grade and graduate normally then Akitaka-san will be sad.”

“That’s a completely different issue. Besides, doesn’t trouble keep coming your way because you’re involved with Touko? If you want to rehabilitate me, you need to rehabilitate yourself first. You dropped out of college, what right do you have to say anything in relation to school?”

“Uhh...” Mikiya fell silent. For now, this “dropped out of college attack” was my trump card for shutting him up.

“To bring up rights is... very, unfair I think.”

Which resulted in him mumbling something complicated, then Mikiya sighed.

With that, the conversation finally ended and I was in a daze the rest of the morning.

Even though today was a holiday, Mikiya stayed in my room instead of going out anywhere.

I was laying on the bed and Mikiya was sitting on the floor doing something.

... Just one month ago, scenes like this were ordinary.

I remember one guy who used to be there.

Now he was gone, the roommate that shouldn’t have been there from the beginning.

Now that he was gone, I felt a faint trace of regret.

A hole in your chest will never be filled once it’s there. No matter how small the hole is, the emptiness it creates is uncomfortable and feels bad.

Then, I thought.

If just having that guy gone made me feel this uncomfortable, what would I feel if I truly lost the guy sitting before me now?

From my awakening in June, I have only about five months of memories.

Not the memories of the old Ryougi Shiki, but fragments of the everyday life I have now.

It’s all really boring stuff and without value. But it would be a shame to throw them away so I’ve carefully kept them in my heart.

... There was a part of me that's missing. Touko said in a bossy way that it was something that needed to be filled.

She was right. The only way to fill an empty hole was with something.

If so, then perhaps...

After some length of time and experience, have I now determined that this guy was the one to fill it?

"Hey, Kokutou."

I mouthed an old name of his, one I should have hated.

My past self felt too much like a stranger and I didn't want to imitate it. But by doing this maybe I could connect with my past self.

And yet, Mikiya didn't even look back at me.

While I was unusually deep in thought, he was absentmindedly reading a paperback book.

Annoyed, I spoke curtly.

"The key."

"Huh?" Mikiya looked back at me.

I turned my face away, and held out my bruised palm.

Suddenly, something occurred to me.

"I don't have a key to your room. That's not fair."

... Really, it was because of that ridiculous dream.

I myself knew that I was blushing; I was demanding stupid things like a child.

◇

In this way, I thought that I would continue spending daily life with this all-incredibly peaceful person, a spiral without much change.

The season was winter.

Soon this town will be met with snow for the first time in four years.

The same deep crimson snow that fell when Ryougi Shiki and Kokutou Mikiya had first met–––

Paradox Spiral (paradox paradigm) .Lower/ Fin

6
Oblivion Recording
fairy Tale.

A foggy day, deep within the woods.

The scent of green and the sound of insects. I walk further into the distance.

I walk farther into the distance.

Amidst the sunless meadow,

I met some enchanting children.

It's almost lunchtime,

so I've got to get home soon.

"There's no need for you to leave. This place is eternal."

The children burst into song.

But what exactly is eternity?

"It's that which endures forever."

"It's that which remains unchanged forever."

A cradling chorus.

A grass hill bathed in starlight.

The milky mist dissolves,

veiling the path back home.

I still don't know what eternity is.

But I've got to get home soon.

My home lies further into the distance.

My home lies farther into the distance.

The scent of green and the sound of insects. A foggy day, deep within the woods.

I'm sure I can never return.

/Oblivion Recording

Oblivion Recording/1

Following a mild December, I welcomed my sixteenth New Year. The warmth of the occasion, captured in the simple phrase "Happy New Year," is a delight I never tire of, regardless of how many times I've experienced it. Yet, this year, a strange apathy clung to me.

Ugh, come on, what's gotten into me! Even I was startled by my lack of enthusiasm, to the point that I seriously entertained the thought of severing all memories associated with this event. Unfortunately, the human mind doesn't oblige such convenient requests, so my dilemma was left entirely unresolved.

Moping in my room wouldn't do my sullen mood any favors, so after fruitlessly venting my frustrations by tossing and kicking my pillow, I resolved to visit Ms. Touko's office. Perhaps it's due to my family being middle-class that we faithfully observe these seasonal traditions. Despite having a formal outfit prepared for my first shrine visit of the year, I chose to stick to my normal clothes, forgoing the Japanese attire.

"Oh? Azaka dear, are you heading out?"

"Yes. Just greeting someone that's helped me out a lot. I'll be back before dark," I replied with a smile as I left the house.

It was just after noon on January 1st. I tilted my gaze upward to the overcast sky, its appearance seemingly reflective of my own emotions. It offered a strange comfort, lightening my steps just a bit.

Like countless others, I used to cherish New Year's Day. Its transformation into something loathsome occurred on an unforgettable day three years ago. On that day, marking the beginning of '96, I had just returned from my relatives' home in the countryside.

I, Kokutou Azaka, have a frail constitution. Though I boast a perfect record of A's in Physical Education at school, I'm viewed by society as fragile. Deemed too delicate for the city at the age of ten, I was shipped off to my uncle in the countryside. I only returned during summer and winter breaks, but that was something I resented.

Accepting my uncle's offer of adoption, I orchestrated my fresh start in the countryside. I must confess, I lied about my health to make it happen. A measure fueled entirely by Kokutou Mikiya, that dreary brother of mine.

Yes, I was in love with him. Not the affection of siblings, but a yearning for a romantic bond forbidden between brother and sister. At the time, still an elementary school student, my advanced mental age was something I had been keenly aware of. Whether it was due to exceptional looks, academic prowess, or an inherent coldness, I don't know. Perhaps it was all an illusion. But my feelings for Mikiya were undeniably genuine.

It wasn't merely a desire to simply like him or be around him. The intensity was on another level – a longing to possess him entirely, to lock him away from the gaze of everyone else. Even now, these feelings persist. However, after growing up, I knew I could no longer just run in headfirst like a little child. This unspoken love demanded a different approach. I bided my time, waiting for the perfect moment to strike back.

Indeed... A counterattack.

The truth is, Mikiya was the sole reason behind my move to the countryside. I knew that if we stayed together any longer, I'd become nothing more than a little sister in his eyes. The family registry meant nothing; the thought of him unconsciously relegating me to that role was unbearable. Thus, the feigned illness, the escape from home. All I had to do was wait until he forgot about his 'sister,' and only then would I make a grand entrance back into his life. My ensuing days were dedicated to cultivating the perfect ladylike persona. After all, I'd rather make *him* fall for me. I knew exactly what Mikiya's preferences were, so it seemed as easy a task as snapping a pair of chopsticks. You see, my plan was perfect.

And yet, an outrageous obstacle appeared in my way... or rather, made their presence known. It all began on New Year's Day three years prior. Having finally become a middle schooler, old enough to confess my feelings, I returned to my parents' home for a visit. To my utter disbelief, Mikiya wasn't alone. He had brought along a high school classmate, Ryougi Shiki. It was clear they were an item. It's as if she swooped in out of nowhere and snatched him up! Who, in their right mind, would date such a carefree man? Right? That's just bad taste!

The world dissolved into white as shock slammed into me, and I retreated to the countryside in a daze.

As I grappled with what to do, news of a terrible tragedy reached me. Shiki had been in an unfortunate traffic accident, leaving Mikiya alone once more. At the time, well, I do have to admit I felt some manner of sympathy. Though I only met her once, her joyful smile still remained in my memories.

But with that, I was reassured. A freak like Shiki wouldn't appear twice. My plan remained unchanged. Graduate high school, and head to university over there. The passage of eight years would be more than enough to erase any lingering notion of 'sister.' Then, I could finally make my move.

...Or so I thought, as I sat on my uncle's terrace, sipping tea with a smug smile. But as they say, the enemy is not to be underestimated, for just last summer, Shiki regained consciousness. Mikiya went out of his way to call me and convey the news, but it only

served to harden my resolve. Waiting until I graduated from high school was no longer an option. I had to be true to myself.

And so, I acted quickly. I immediately found a prestigious boarding school in the city and started the transfer process. Fortunately, my uncle, unlike my father, was a renowned painter, and I was an excellent student with an impeccable appearance befitting a lady. I was able to easily transfer to Reien Girls' Academy, where they valued the parents' wealth more than the student's grades for admission. Half a year has passed since then, and I'm now facing the New Year, which I've come to despise. Mikiya and I were supposed to go pay our first visit to the shrine together, but Shiki swooped in last night and took him away. Really. In a situation like this, I could not afford to wait any longer.

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The workshop of Aozaki Touko, my magecraft teacher, was located in the center of the industrial district. At first glance, it resembled a building that was abandoned halfway through construction, yet it surprisingly housed a functioning office within. The first floor served as a garage, while the purpose of the second and third floors remained a mystery. My brother, Mikiya, worked in the office on the fourth floor. The director of his company, by the way, also happened to be my mentor.

"Happy New Year!" I greeted her upon entering the office. "Likewise," Ms. Touko replied with a languid air.

Aozaki Touko, a woman in her late twenties, possessed a beauty imbued with quiet dignity. As the company director, her workplace attire was invariably a crisp, no-nonsense suit. Today, the absence of her glasses only accentuated the sharpness of her gaze.

"Ah, Azaka," she said with a sly smile, still perched in her director's chair. "So much for your date with Kokutou today, I presume?"

"Shiki arrived and whisked him away. I'm sorry for canceling the lecture earlier, but do you mind if we proceeded as originally planned?"

"Perfect timing. I had something I wanted to discuss with you, as well."

Surprise flickered across my face. It was a rare occurrence for Ms. Touko to initiate conversation. I made her a cup of coffee and whipped up some tea for myself, before settling into my chair.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

"Nothing much, just curious if you've confessed to Kokutou yet."

Oh, for goodness sake. It was clear that she wasn't taking this seriously at all.

“I have not, and I don't intend to. What about it?"

"How boring. If I'd asked Kokutou, he'd be a flustered mess. You, on the other hand, answer without batting an eye. It's rare for siblings to be so different. Ever wonder if you're truly related, Azaka?"

"If we weren't, there wouldn't be a problem."

As I sulked inwardly, Ms. Touko chuckled softly. "You really are pure, Azaka. My apologies, that was a silly question. It seems even I make a slip-up once a year. Forgive me."

"Using up your annual slip of the tongue on New Year's Day? Impressive start. So, what was it you actually wanted?"

"It's about your school. You're a first-year at Reien Girls' Academy, aren't you? Have you heard about the incident in Class 1-D?"

Class 1-D? If I remember correctly, that's...

"The class Tachibana Kaori was in, right? I'm in Class A, so I don't know very much about Class D."

"Tachibana... Kaori? Never heard of her. The list doesn't have that name either."

Ms. Touko furrowed her brow in displeasure. I mirrored her confusion, tilting my head. There was clearly a significant misunderstanding between us.

"Um, what exactly are you talking about?"

"Right, you must not have heard. Well, I suppose it wouldn't have come up since you're in a different class. Reien seems to follow a system of class segregation, so I guess only the students in Class D would know about it."

Satisfied with her own explanation, Ms. Touko began to elaborate on the details of the incident. Two weeks prior to the winter break, a heated argument between students from Class 1-D escalated to a physical altercation involving box cutters.
It was hard to imagine such a violent event happening in the closed-off world of Reien. Stepping through the academy gates transformed it into a prison you could not escape without special privileges. Inside, an eerie stillness reigned, a sense of suspended time. A pathologically sanitized environment in which violence seemed utterly inconceivable.

"So... how bad were the injuries?" I asked.

"The injuries themselves were nothing serious," Ms. Touko explained. "The problem lies elsewhere. Both students were injured, Azaka. Do you understand the significance of that?"

"So, they inflicted those wounds on each other simultaneously? The argument ended in a stalemate, with both sides coming to the same conclusion?"

"Precisely," Ms. Touko agreed. "The details of said argument can wait. But the problem doesn't end there. You see, this incident wasn't reported immediately. It only came to light when Mother, the principal, checked the infirmary logs during winter break and found entries for both injured students. This suggests that the homeroom teacher of Class D deliberately covered up the incident."

At the time, the Class D homeroom teacher was Hayama Hideo, one of the two male teachers at Reien. However, he vanished after taking responsibility for the student dormitory fire in November. If I recall correctly, his replacement wasn't a Sister, but...

"I don't think Mr. Kurogiri is that type of person," I blurted out before I could stop myself.

Ms. Touko nodded in agreement. "Mother said much the same. Kurogiri Satsuki, the

replacement homeroom teacher for Class 1-D, clearly commands a lot of trust. Apparently, when she questioned him about the incident, he had no recollection of it until she prompted him. It was a fishy story, to be sure, but there was no hint of deception in his demeanor. It seems he genuinely forgot everything."

"Could such a thing... really be possible?" I wondered. It's impossible to completely forget something that happened only two weeks ago. But... I couldn't help but think that it could've really happened, considering it was Mr. Kurogiri.

"To return to the narrative, the two students started arguing after school, and were overheard by onlookers. It seems the argument arose because their secrets had been exposed. Not just any secrets, mind you, but ones of a particularly odd nature—secrets the students themselves had forgotten."

"Huh?"

"As I mentioned, their argument stemmed from childhood secrets they'd completely forgotten being brought to light," Ms. Touko explained. "A month ago, they started receiving letters detailing events that neither student could recall. Perplexing at first, the contents slowly morphed into a horrifying realization—these were stories from their own past. They soon became fraught with anxiety, leading them to confront the other only to discover they'd received similar letters. Being childhood friends, they both reached the conclusion that the only person who could remember their forgotten past was the other. Convinced that the other was the culprit, they grabbed box cutters and attacked each other."

I was at a complete loss for words. Letters containing forgotten memories, secrets buried even from their own minds...

"Could this be some sort of blackmail, Ms. Touko?" I asked.

"I doubt it," Ms. Touko replied. "Supposedly, the letters just dredged up forgotten memories, nothing threatening. Stalking someone around the clock wouldn't unearth such things, especially events they themselves don't recall. It certainly is quite creepy though."

"I don't think it's *just* creepy," I argued. "They might have found the letters amusing at first, but what if it went on for a month? Someone knew things about them that they themselves did not. Their minds must have been driven to the brink with each passing day as they read the letters from this unknown observer.

Perhaps... we should be thankful that it only ended with them slashing each other with box cutters."

"So, Ms. Touko, was the sender of those letters ever found?" "The senders," Ms. Touko corrected flatly, "were fairies."

I almost cried out in surprise.

"...Excuse me. Could you please repeat that?"

"Fairies, I said. What, you haven't heard about them either, Azaka? If my theory is right, the many sightings have been caused by the fact that Reien attracts girls with strong spiritual senses. You probably can't see them because your eyes aren't attuned to spirits, but they're apparently well-known among the dorm residents. Fairies fly to their pillows at night, and when they wake up, they're missing chunks of their memories from the past few days.

Gathering memories is pretty much their job, so it stands to reason. By that logic, the Class D incident has to be connected to them somehow," Ms. Touko explained calmly.

Despite having learned magecraft from this person, I found myself unable to believe her story. "But do *you* believe it, Ms. Touko?"

"I can't say for certain without witnessing them myself, but Reien is the kind of place where fairies would exist. It certainly has the atmosphere for it. The school is isolated from the outside world, and even the clamor of traffic doesn't reach the grounds. Rigid regulations reign supreme, enforced by the silent Sisters. Frivolous trends that captivate the youth find no purchase within those walls. The woods, vast as a true forest, envelop most of the school's domain.

Getting lost in them would mean a half-day journey to find your way back. The air itself carries a sweet, candy-like smell, and the hands of the clock move as slow as an elder's knitting needles. See? It's practically a fairyland, nestled right in the city's heart."

"You seem very well informed. It's almost as if you know the school personally, Ms. Touko."

“Well, of course I do. I'm an alumna of that place." This time, I *actually* cried out in shock.

"What's with that look? Did you really think Mother Riesbyfe would consult an outsider about such a shameful incident? Last night, I received a request from her to investigate this case. This is by no means a detective agency, but I couldn't refuse a request from none other than her. But it would be too conspicuous if I were to barge into the school. I was wondering what to do when… Azaka?"

I didn't want to hear it, so I turned away from her. Ms. Touko stared at me with emotionless eyes, and then abruptly changed the subject. "So, Azaka, what do you associate with fairies?"

"Fairies.. you say? Like, little girls with wings?" My uncertain response elicited a gentle chuckle from her, who appeared to find my imagination rather endearing.

"There are many different kinds of fairies, so it's possible that some do resemble your depiction. However, such entities are typically familiars created by a mage. Unlike fantasies that gain form through accumulated ideations, such as devils, fairies are a genuine lineage of organisms. Their physical structures adhere to biological principles and don't exhibit any impossibilities. Goblins and redcaps, in a sense, could be considered pure fairies.

Phantasmal species like fairies and dragons exemplify this. In Japan, pure-blooded oni would fall under this category, but they have frequently

established contact with us. Unlike devils, which are passive entities created and brought forth by human desires, fairies are active beings.

In Scotland, tales of their mischievous pranks persist, one of which involves inducing forgetfulness in humans. They might also lure children into the forest for a week, swap newborn babies with fairy children, or scatter dead rabbits on people's doorsteps. These pranks, never rising above the level of childish mischief, are fairly amusing.

While otherwise lacking any semblance of consistency, they do share one common trait: fairies do not have a sense of gain or loss. They engage in these activities simply for amusement, never seeking anything in return.

But the Reien incident differs. Writing stolen memories into letters reeks of malice, wouldn't you agree? Furthermore, the Reien fairies are said to possess the adorable appearance that you described."

I see... I had been outplayed. I never thought she'd go right for my Achilles' heel. How frustrating. For the sake of my pride, I was the one to initiate conversation this time.

"In other words, the fairies that appeared in Reien Academy are artificial creations, familiars. The existence of malicious intent means there must be a mage controlling them."

Ms. Touko nodded happily in assent. "I've explained familiars before, haven't I? Two methods exist for their creation. One involves a mage offering a part of their own body. The other utilizes a living creature as a base. This particular case is clearly the latter, tasked solely with memory theft. Childish and dull."

Ignoring said dull chore she was clearly pawning off, my mentor continued. "Well, I suppose it was to be expected. Fairies are notoriously difficult to control. Often, mages find themselves fulfilling the fairies' demands rather than the other way around. They're always making unreasonable requests, after all. As a result, few mages have ever attempted to make fairies their familiars.

Those who do must possess exceptional skill. However, this situation is different. It's likely an amateur employing a fairy-like familiar, making it an ideal opportunity for your training.

Therefore, Azaka. As your master, I hereby order you to conduct a thorough investigation. Uncover the truth behind this matter. Your deadline is the end of winter break. I don't expect you to eliminate the root cause, but if you can, go for it."

An expected outcome. With a resigned nod, I forced composure. "If this is part of my training, then so be it."

Ms. Touko rose from her seat, reaching for a stack of detailed files. Before she could hand them over, I voiced my one concern. "But Ms. Touko, I can't see fairies. Unlike you, I don't have Mystic Eyes."

An unfamiliar laugh, cold and sinister, slithered from her throat. It sent shivers down my spine, making me want to lash out. "Oh, don't worry about that. I have the perfect substitute for your eyes," she said with a sly grin, refusing to elaborate.

Oblivion Recording/2

She and I left the high school faculty room at Reien Girls' Academy together.

◇

"You know, I've been wondering about this for a while now. Is Touko actually a dumbass?"

January 4, Monday. It was an early afternoon with a cloudy sky. Walking alongside me was my substitute set of eyes, casually muttering some words of abuse. I wholeheartedly expressed my agreement, setting aside my feelings of antagonism toward her for the time being.

"I have to agree. She must've lost her mind if she thought it was a good idea to send *you* of all people on an undercover mission to Reien."

"Oh, come on. Can't you tell that *I'm* the one getting screwed over here? She even made me act like I'd be transferring in from the third semester when I never planned on doing anything like that."

We walked through the school's hallways, bickering without so much as a glimpse of the other's face. Standing beside me was the girl known as Ryougi Shiki. Apparently Reien's uniform was designed to resemble a nun's garb, so that the students would be able to go to mass without needing to change. It was a black habit that came equipped with some of the usual features of a school uniform. You'd be hard pressed to say that your average Japanese student would look good in it.

Regardless, there Shiki was, sporting it like it was just another set of clothes in her usual wardrobe. Her hair was an even deeper shade than her uniform, contrasting with the dark black that enveloped her body. Also worthy of note were her dainty shoulders and her nape. They seemed so pale that even I was entranced by them for a moment. Shiki may be

older than me, but she always had this air of youth about her. Even though she was only slightly taller than me, she always seemed so dignified, giving off the false impression that she was a prim and proper Christian. I couldn't help but feel a bit defeated.

"Azaka, those two are staring at us," Shiki said as she gazed upon the two upperclassmen who passed us by. It wasn't hard for me to surmise what they were gossiping about. At an all-girls school like Reien, the concept of men was far detached from the usual preferences of the students. Still, that didn't stop anyone from harboring desires for some sort of masculinity, so androgynous beauties were often the talk of the entire school. Students of her type weren't too common in Reien, so Shiki would've become the school's idol in no time if she'd really transferred in. I had no doubt that those two immediately realized that when they saw her elegant masculinity.

"We just don't get a lot of transfer students here. I doubt it has anything to do with our investigation."

"How strange. Why are there so many students when it's supposed to be winter break?"

"Since this is a boarding school, a good chunk of students prefer to stay here while on break. Right now, only the first floor with the library and the fourth floor are open to students, so everyone just has to make do with the dorm's facilities. Because of that, you don't really see a lot of students in the actual school building, unless they've been summoned by one of the Sisters for a violation, of course."

Three violations meant an expulsion from the school. The truth is, I'd actually been summoned by the Sisters a couple of times before. No matter the reason, no student was allowed to leave the school grounds. Even going to see your parents wasn't considered a valid reason by the school. The students were all fully aware of this fact, and their guardians actually enrolled them in Reien partly because of this stringency.

As for me and my friend Fujino, we both had our own unique reasons as to why we hadn't been expelled despite leaving the school grounds multiple times.

Fujino's father's donations made up thirty percent of the monetary contributions made toward the school. For that reason, she wasn't—no, she couldn't be expelled.

In my case, I couldn't deny that it was partly because of my uncle's reputation, but I was practically a hired gun employed by the school to raise their college enrollment rates. Since Reien was still a school first and foremost, having students go on to enroll in famous universities was quite desirable for them, so they turned a blind eye to my offenses because of that. In fact, my enrollment to Reien was only permitted under the assumption that I would go on to enroll in T University. All the praying in the world would do nothing to affect the students' grades. It was quite a crude proposition from the side of the school's administrators, but I didn't pay it any heed. After all, I was making full use of the benefits afforded to me.

While I lost myself in thought, Shiki languidly examined the school building. Almost immediately losing interest, she then proceeded to fiddle with the tiny cross that was dangling down her neck.

"This school's weird. I can't tell if the Sisters are masquerading as teachers, or if the teachers are masquerading as Sisters. Is that chapel the place where they go all *Our Father, who start*

in heaven?" Shiki asked curtly.

What's he supposed to start in heaven? You idiot.

"Church service takes place once in the morning, and once at night. Mass is once every Sunday, but students are only required to show up to service.

Students like me who transferred into Reien in high school aren't Christians, so I've never actually heard mass. Of course, the nuns may view you in a different light because of that, but all religious beliefs are welcome here, so they can't force you to hear mass.

Reien has historically operated as a missionary school, but it's come to be regarded as a school for wealthy families to send their daughters to. As a result, many of the students currently enrolled here have no interest in religion. No matter how horrible someone's conduct may be, simply having Reien as their alma mater is enough to attract potential suitors. I'd say that's the main reason people choose to enroll their children here.

Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that the number of students who come here purely because of their religious beliefs has been on the downturn. Besides, it's not like any parents would enroll their children just to have them learn about Christianity in this day and age, right? Still, that doesn't mean that there aren't any true Christians among the students, though."

"God, huh? Who knows if he actually exists up there."

I felt a strange sense of unease. I'd already gotten used to Shiki's boyish tone, but seeing her act like a graceful devotee left me utterly bewildered.

"Well, we can't say anything about God, but have you seen anything else yet?" I offhandedly asked her as we walked.

Shiki shook her head in refutation.

"Absolutely nothing. We might have to wait until night instead," she replied as she looked upon me drowsily.

Shiki has the power to see things that normal people can't. Aside from being able to see spirits, she can apparently see the lines that hold an object together. On top of that, she's a savage at heart with incredible reflexes and physical abilities. If I were to be honest, she's the exact opposite of Mikiya—she's someone special. Someone like that is the last person I'd ever want to see with him.

In the first place, I actually only began training with Ms. Touko because of her. If Mikiya's partner was an average girl, I would've been able to eliminate her in a single day. However, I was soon faced with the reality that Shiki was on a completely different level altogether.

Realizing that I wouldn't ever be able to match up to her, I decided to do away with whatever common sense I had left and asked Ms. Touko to make me her disciple in magecraft. Despite all of that, I had to cope with the bitter truth that I still wouldn't be able to match up to Shiki, and so there I was honing my skills day by day. The truth was that I was quite conflicted about all of this. But if I had to say what the pressing issue was…

"We're gonna be sharing a room, right? I guess I can put up with having you as my roommate," Shiki said, letting out a sigh of resignation.

Mikiya once told me that Shiki refused to stay at any place she didn't personally approve of, and yet she was willing to put up with me despite never having been to my room. The problem was that Shiki didn't actually seem to have anything against me. Because of that, the fact that I one-sidedly harbored ill will toward her made things complicated. It goes without saying that had I not been in love with Mikiya, Shiki and I could've actually been good friends. I proceeded to let out a sigh of my own.

Shiki fixed her gaze on me in response. "Where are you going, Azaka? Weren't we supposed to be heading to the dorm?"

"What good is that going to do us? We should go and talk to Class 1-D's homeroom teacher first. You're supposed to be my substitute set of eyes, so I'll have you examine everyone we meet."

"Homeroom teacher? You mean that Hayama guy?"

"No, not him. He left the school in November. Their current homeroom teacher is called Kurogiri Satsuki. Both of them are quite unusual cases though, being amongst the few male members of the faculty."

"A male teacher in an all-girls school, huh? No one would bat an eye if this were a normal school, but that'd be quite the unusual sight in a place like this."

Shiki was right. Male teachers would be nothing but a sight for sore eyes in a school whose primary purpose was to develop young girls into proper ladies.

They'd prevented leaving the school grounds in order to prevent illicit contact with the opposite sex, and yet they willingly let a Trojan horse into the academy.

"Indeed. Apparently, there were some circumstances regarding Hayama's hiring. He was known for having a poor reputation among students. Reien used to be the sister school of another renowned institution in England. Regardless, none of the Sisters, and not even Mother herself did anything about it. You see, the director goes by the surname Ouji now, but his name used to be Hayama before he married into another family."

"Which means he's the director's scumbag little brother. Why'd he quit then?"

"Do you remember when I was at Ms. Touko's office back in November? I mentioned it back then, but a fire broke out at the high school dorms. All the first- and second-year dorms for Class C and beyond burned down. The dorms here are divided by year, but they're also divided by class after that. The fire started in Block D of the first-year dorms. For some reason, Mr. Hayama decided to set the whole place on fire. As you'd expect, the director had no choice but to get rid of him after that, but he'd already left the campus at that point."

"He probably ran away," I added.

News of the fire stayed within the school. I heard that the firemen who were on the scene and the students' families all worked together to keep any word pertaining to the incident from getting out. I suppose they didn't want the school where their beloved daughters were enrolled in to be the subject of a scandal.

Even when someone lost her life in that fire. "What's the deal with this Kurogiri person?"

"I haven't heard a single bad thing about him. He's practically the opposite of Hayama. I don't think a single Reien student has anything against him. Mr. Kurogiri started teaching last summer, but he didn't have any sort of the backing Hayama did. He did have Mother's approval though.

Reien apparently used to be the sister school of another renowned institution in England, as I already mentioned. Unlike Reien though, the other school's already closed. Mother wanted to make it so that only the English could be employed here, but it wasn't exactly easy to find someone who could speak Japanese at the same time. Mr. Kurogiri's a different case though. He was raised abroad, so he has perfect pronunciation. Mother always praises the fact that he doesn't have one of those 'horrendous American accents'."

"So he's an English teacher then?" Shiki muttered as she furrowed her brow. Perhaps her tendency to favour Japanese sensibilities meant that she couldn't speak English at all?

"He speaks more than just English. I heard that he has licences to teach German and French too, and that he's even quite proficient at Chinese and some South American languages. He's a weirdo that gets called a language nerd behind his back. For the two of us though, he's a special case in a completely different way. I just can't seem to keep my composure around him," I said as I stopped in my tracks.

We had arrived at the English preparation room at the end of the first floor. At Reien, the faculty room was meant for administrative duties, which meant that each teacher had a separate preparation room assigned for every subject they taught. In Mr. Kurogiri's case, he used the same one that Hayama used. I quietly took a deep breath while ensuring that Shiki wouldn't notice, and then knocked on the door.

◇

Kurogiri Satsuki was facing his desk, his back against us. His desk was by the window, illuminated by the faint rays of sun. In contrast to its name, the preparation room was actually as cluttered as a laboratory.

"My name is Kokutou Azaka, from Class 1-A. I take it you've already heard from Mother?"

He nodded in affirmation as he began to turn around. His chair spun as he moved, eventually leaving us directly facing each other.

"..."

I felt Shiki take a deep breath beside me. Even I couldn't stop myself from experiencing a bout of dizziness the first time I saw him.

"Ah, yes. You're here exactly as I've been informed, Kokutou. Please, do have a seat. We will be here for quite some time, no?" he said calmly, with a gentle smile on his face.

He was about twenty-five years old, which made him the youngest among all of the teachers. His slender body and black glasses only served to accentuate the impression that he was a harmless man who had an affection toward the humanities.

"I assume you've come to speak about Class D?"

"That's right. More specifically, I came to ask about the two students who started fighting with box cutters."

Upon hearing my reply, Mr. Kurogiri squinched his eyes in apology. His dejection was so evident that simply looking at him was enough to bring my spirits down.

"I'm terribly sorry, but I do not believe I will be able to offer any assistance. The truth is, I only vaguely remember the incident myself. All I know for certain is that I was unable to stop them. I was right there, and yet I couldn't do anything."

He shut his eyes, lamenting the fact that his powerlessness had led to the harm of his own students. Kurogiri was the same as *him*. The type of person who despaired at the tragedies of the people around them, constantly bearing a cross that shouldn't have been theirs to shoulder. A man that was too kind for his own good, unable to ever hurt another human being.

"Do you have any idea what started the argument?" I asked just in case.

He quietly shook his head from side-to-side.

"The other students told me that I stopped their quarrel. However, I have no recollection of anything that transpired on that day. People often tell me that I'm the forgetful type, but this is a first. I feel as though my memories have been wiped clean. I may have heard something important back then, but we no longer have any way of finding out what that might have been. No, I cannot even fully deny the possibility that I may have been the one that caused their quarrel in the first place. The fact of the matter is that I was there, in the same classroom. That should be reason enough for me to be held liable," he said, markedly distressed.

It was then that I realized. The fact that they'd been sent letters containing secrets they'd already forgotten about must've caused the Class D students a significant amount of stress. However, they weren't the only ones who had fallen victim to this unseen sense of anxiety. Mr. Kurogiri was right there when it happened, and yet he was unable to remember anything that transpired.

There was no doubt that his mental balance was left on a knife's edge after an incident like that. If I were in his position, I knew that I'd feel the same. The loss of memories is an unending pitfall of unease. You'd be left oblivious to anything gained and lost within that span of time. Even the things you did on your own volition would seem alien to you. The more you let that fact torment you, the deeper and darker the hole you put yourself in would get. You wouldn't be able to deny even the simplest of facts without any memories. It's no wonder that he'd begun to consider the possibility that he started it all.

"I've heard that other students of the class saw the whole thing from start to finish. According to them, all you did was try to break up the fight."

"Unfortunately, it isn't quite that simple. Remember, you cannot rely on the recollection of others when verifying your memories. In order to substantiate the past, one can only rely on the weight of their own memories to truly tip the scales. That is why I firmly believe that we should at least consider the possibility that I was at fault. Sorry, forget about all that. Running around in circles like this won't do us any good. I may be unable to provide anything of value in my current condition, but do feel free to ask me anything."

He forced a strained smile as I nodded in affirmation.

"All right. Have any of your students been behaving strangely recently? For example, like forgetting their assignments and stuff."

"Nothing of that sort. Still, I can't deny that my students have been rather on edge as of late. At least that's what the Sisters have told me. I can't attest to their behavior prior to my hiring, but I do think that they've been strangely silent."

"In what way? Like they're afraid of something?"

Having expected this beforehand, I immediately sought confirmation. Why didn't any of the other students bother stopping them even though the argument had escalated to the point of violence? Were they simply disinterested? No, if that was the case, they wouldn't have known what the two were arguing about in the first place.

The logical conclusion would be that the letters containing the forgotten memories were sent to every single student of Class D. That'd be one way to explain why none of the other students bothered to intervene at all. They'd be able to find out which of the two sent the letter if they just let everything play out. Unfortunately, Mr. Kurogiri's response didn't serve to back up my conjecture.

"I'm not too sure if that's the best word for it." "Could you explain a bit more?"

"Of course. I'd say it's more like they're all monitoring each other with a watchful eye. That said, I don't know why they're doing that."

Monitoring each other, huh? The implications were slightly different, but my idea wasn't too far off. In other words, the students were convinced that the enemy was not someone on the outside, but someone from within their class.

“Could you reach out to your students for me?"

Questioning the bystanders who still had their memories intact was our best shot. None of them would suspect anything if we asked the students who were spreading the rumors about the fairies.

"There's no need for that. All of my students are still in the dorm. You shouldn't have any problems finding them."

I couldn't stifle my surprise at his reply. Not a single one of his students had left the school for winter break. A coincidence such as that may as well have been fate.

"Thank you for your time. We may be requiring your cooperation again in the near future, so I hope you don't mind. Let's go, Shiki."

I called out to Shiki, who was beside me, and stood up. It was then that Mr. Kurogiri turned his gaze toward me, visibly perplexed.

"Is something the matter?"

He didn't respond. Instead, it was Shiki who broke the silence for the first time since entering the room.

"She's talking about me, Mr. Kurogiri." she responded in a distinctly feminine tone.

"Ah, right. I'd forgotten you were there. I haven't seen you around here. Are you a new

student?" he replied cheerfully.

"Nothing's set in stone yet. I've only been touring the premises today. If it piques my interest, I may just consider transferring in.

Mr. Kurogiri nodded in content, and proceeded to fasten his gaze on Shiki. He glanced at her like an artist who stood before his ideal model, scrutinizing her every feature. Meanwhile, I simply stood and watched as it happened. It was then that we heard a knock on the door.

“I'm coming in."

As her harmonious voice reached our ears, in came an upperclassman with long hair. She had dark, black hair that stretched all the way down to her back, along with almond-shaped eyes that reinforced her elegance. I immediately recognized her. She stood out even among the students of Reien, where beauties were a common sight. In the first place, no student would fail to recognize the woman who headed the student council up until last year. Her gaze that seemed to look down upon others, and her narrow, long eyelashes both served to emphasize her regality more than they did her beauty. It seemed as though she was a princess who had lived most of her life in a castle. Right, her name was…

"Ah, Ouji. My apologies, I didn't realize it had gotten so late already," he said in response to Ouji Misaya.

"Indeed," she said in a tone filled with conviction. "Mr. Kurogiri, it's already past the time of our appointment. You were supposed to be in the student council room by no later than one o'clock. Time is a finite resource.

Understanding how to manage it properly is of utmost importance." She continued, unabashedly expressing her discontentment with Mr. Kurogiri.

Her stern decorum was no pretense. I'd often heard that she was known as a tyrant when she headed the student council. I'd only ever heard the stories because she was preparing to hand over the reins when I transferred in, but Fujino said that not even the Sisters were able to voice their opinions toward her. That wasn't all though. Apparently, even the director couldn't stand up to her. Of course, there was a valid reason behind that. While the director had only married into the family, she was a full-fledged member of the Ouji clan. As the second daughter of the Ouji lineage, the director's authority was nothing when compared to hers.

All of the children of the Ouji family were adopted, but anyone who was fragile enough to let that fact affect them would not be worthy to succeed a massive conglomerate such as theirs. The Ouji family sought out children who had the strength of will to live up to the honor of their lineage's name in spite of being adopted. Because of this, they only adopted children with promising prospects. In other words, Ouji Misaya was a woman with an iron will.

However, she was also known to value integrity. While she had no mercy to spare for students who broke the rules, I'd heard that she was a caring upperclassman to those who abided by them. She was also a devout Christian, which meant that she took part in the noontime mass every Sunday.

"How harsh. A 'finite resource', huh? There you go with your hard words again," Mr. Kurogiri smiled as he stood up.

On the other hand, Ouji simply stared at him in exasperation. It was no surprise that someone as easygoing as Mr. Kurogiri would earn the ire of a disciplinarian like her. She then shifted her gaze toward us, tossing a probing look of hostility our way. Deciding not to complicate the situation any further, I pulled Shiki's arm and started walking.

"Let's move on to the next one."

We made our way toward the exit. When I was about to get the door, Mr. Kurogiri calmly opened it for us instead, like a butler sending off his guests. I bowed my head in thanks.

"No worries. I really am sorry that I couldn't offer anything of value. You two have a good day off."

He bade his farewells with the same gentle smile as always. It was a lonely smile that seemed like it would vanish with a single breeze of wind.

"You always wear such a sad smile on your face." Shiki remarked all of a sudden.

Mr. Kurogiri opened his eyes wide in surprise and nodded.

"Except I've never smiled in my entire life. Not even once." he replied, smiling faintly.

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After leaving the preparation room, we decided to return to the dorm. We went past the first floor hallway and into the courtyard.

Reien's grounds were as large as a university's. In order to take full advantage of the entire space, the school buildings, gymnasiums, and dorms were far detached from one another. This went for all divisions of the school. A good example would be an amusement park, where different attractions corresponded to different school buildings. I realized that it'd be quite hard to find a more apt example than this. Quite the picturesque scene, honestly. I decided to tell Mikiya about it someday.

It was a long trek back to the dorms from the school building. We had to pass through the forest, which was used as a marathon course, on our way back. The school constructed a walkway so that we could pass through without having to change shoes.

The floor creaked as Shiki and I walked across the wooden floorboards. Shiki seemed shaken. I understood where she was coming from though. I'd be shocked if she maintained her composure after seeing someone as similar as him.

"You're surprised at how much he resembles Mikiya, aren't you?" Shiki candidly nodded in approval.

"Right? Mr. Kurogiri's more handsome though." "I guess. Kurogiri is certainly more chiseled."

Though our choice of words was different, our opinions were in alignment. Indeed, Kurogiri Satsuki was the splitting image of Kokutou Mikiya. Not only did they resemble

each other on the exterior, even their interiors were a perfect match. The only difference was that Kurogiri seemed more apt at accepting things the way they were. Perhaps it was a product of his age.

Shiki and I are both individuals who cause problems for the people around us just by existing. Because of that, the existence of ordinary people who were unable to hurt anyone around them was a huge shock in and of itself. I remember crying the first time I realized that Mikiya and I were two completely different people.

When was that again? A long time ago, within childhood memories that I'd already forgotten, something happened that made me realize that Mikiya was that type of person. Even though we were siblings who lived under the same roof, I soon began to desire him for myself. I knew that such feelings weren't normal for a pair of siblings. But still, I couldn't bring myself to believe that my love was a mistake. There was only one thing I regretted with all my heart.

It was the fact that I had forgotten why I'd begun to hold him so dear in the first place.

"Still, he's Kurogiri Satsuki, and no one else. No matter how similar they may be, he will never be Kokutou Mikiya."

Though such a thing was obvious from the start, I still felt that I had to put it into words. I was convinced that Shiki would agree with me. Yet for some reason, she furrowed her brows in perplexity instead of nodding.

"Similar, huh? I'd say it's more like they're…" She suddenly stopped moving and began peering into the forest as though she was glaring at the trees. "There's something there, Azaka. I think it's some wooden building."

"That's the old school building. It used to house the elementary school. I heard they were planning to demolish it this winter break. Is something up with it?"

"I'm gonna take a peek. You go on ahead."

She quickly vanished into the woods, her black skirt fluttering with the wind.

"Hold on, Shiki! You promised you wouldn't go snooping around on your own, didn't you?!"

I immediately decided to give chase.

“Kokutou... Azaka?"

Before I could do anything, a voice from behind stopped me in my tracks.

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"Got a new job for you, Shiki," Touko's voice crackled over the phone.

It was the night of January 2nd, and the task she presented was unlike any other. The request to investigate a strange incident at Reien Girls' Academy, Azaka's school, did not appeal to me whatsoever.

I, Ryougi Shiki, cooperated with Aozaki Touko under the condition that I could commit murder. This time, however, the objective was merely to find the cause. Hardly enough to quench the drought within my empty heart. True, Touko's jobs often involved killing things, mostly entailing the disposal of incomprehensible monsters. But never humans. Even though I had an opportunity for that in the summer against an opponent that could 'bend things with a glance', I ended up not going for the kill.

To be honest, that's when I finally understood Shiki's fixation with murder and made a compromise. As long as it was a duel to the death, I didn't care who it was. Though that satiated my hunger momentarily, it offered no true sustenance. Discontent with my life continued to gnaw at me, culminating with the allocation of this vague job: to uncover the mastermind behind the incident.

As much as I couldn't care less for this job, it wasn't like I had anything better to do. If the only difference was whether I slept in my room or in Reien, I couldn't find any reason to refuse. After a briefing, I set off for the school to act as Azaka's eyes, since she could not see the fairies. A transfer student for the winter break, posing as a future third-semester enrollee.

◇

I pressed on into the woods, Azaka no longer by my side. Through the curtain of trees, I glimpsed upon a wooden schoolhouse, my destination. Perhaps because of the cloudy weather, the forest looked ashen gray, as if shrouded in fog. The trees planted between the school buildings had already exceeded the bounds of the campus, claiming most of it as their domain. This wasn't a school that had a forest in it; it was a forest that had a school in it.

As I trod along the humus-covered ground, I absentmindedly inhaled the scent of the air, fragrant and colorful, like a gushing stream of water. The smell of leaves and the sound of insects blended together, intoxicating my mind like a haze. The air was sweet and heavy, like ripe fruit, and the scenery seemingly moved at a leisurely pace. It was as if I was walking through a watercolor painting, a strange and fluffy feeling.

Indeed... This academy, isolated from the outside, was a different world.

A memory suddenly sprang to mind. In the past, there had been a man who created a foreign world by prohibiting entry to an apartment building. How convoluted. If he had simply erected walls around the perimeter, mirroring this academy or the Ryougi mansion, that alone would have severed the connection between his world and the outside one.

Soon, I emerged from the forest. The building, said to have once been used for an elementary school, was an old-fashioned four-story wooden structure. It stood silently in the middle of the forest, in a clearing where the trees had been cut down in a circle, unbreathing. Dry grass covered the ground, making it look like a meadow. The school building resembled an old man on his deathbed, waiting for the end to come.

Stepping on the grass, I crossed the threshold and entered. Inside, it was not as worn down as it had appeared from the outside. Perhaps it was because this place was for elementary school students that the building felt rather small. The wooden floorboards creaked with every step.

Chirp. Chirp. Chirp. Chirp.

The sound of the insects could be heard even from within the building. I stopped in the center of the empty corridor.

"Kurogiri... Satsuki."

The teacher from earlier, the one Azaka likened to Mikiya, lingered in my thoughts. Admittedly, the resemblance was there. All humans share a fundamental face structure, leading to a certain degree of similarity. However, this was more than mere appearance—their very aura felt strikingly alike.

"This goes beyond just a resemblance. They're practically identical."

And yet, there was something fundamentally different. What was it? The answer hovered just beyond my grasp, a wisp of memory on the tip of my tongue.

Knowledge without comprehension. I really had become terribly human.

Six months ago, when I first awoke, everything made sense. Everything I hadn't understood was something Shiki didn't know either, so there had been no need to dwell on it. Since

then, I experienced events she never had, carving new knowledge into my brain. The wall of despair, once a chasm between pre-accident Shiki and me, seemed to crumble with each passing day.

Perhaps due to the absence of my own emotions, I began accumulating memories through strange encounters much like this. These fragments of reality, both trivial and inconsequential, were filling the hole in my chest. While I still didn't feel truly alive, the abyss I felt upon awakening was no more. So, if this emptiness were to one day disappear, perhaps then... perhaps then, I too could dream.

"That's a fleeting hope, SHIKI," I whispered to myself, knowing there would be no reply.

"More like a fool's dream."

...but there was.

Chirp. Chirp. Chirp.

The buzzing of insects filled the air. A prick at the back of my neck sent a jolt through me.

"...Ah!"

My world blurred, memories of this place dissolving into a white haze. The scene before me began to fade, like an eraser steadily scraping away at an image. Pathetic. I came here precisely because this was their nest, yet I...

"Damn it!" I lashed out in disgust. Reaching behind my neck, I felt something in my grasp. I could tell by the sensation that it was humanoid, slightly larger than the palm of my hand. Without hesitation, I crushed it in my fist. A shrill, earsplitting shriek pierced the air.

And with that, my fading consciousness snapped back into focus. Withdrawing my hand from my neck, I stared at it intently. All that remained was a white liquid, dripping slowly onto the floor in a thick, viscous stream. It seemed that whatever I had crushed had disintegrated the moment I tightened my grip. I had never seen a fairy before, so I couldn't be sure whether this was what Azaka had described.

"...Disgusting," I muttered, shaking my hand to dislodge the liquid. Strangely, despite its sticky nature, it came off easily.

The incessant buzzing of the insects had now ceased. In my haste to rid myself of the unpleasant fairy, it seems I had made a mistake. The swarm of fairy-like entities that had been present moments ago had vanished without a trace. Did they flee in fear of their fallen comrade, or did their master order a retreat when they saw I could catch them?

Either way, it seemed that any leads I might have found in this abandoned school building had dried up. I retraced my steps and returned to the walkway.

◇

Back in the walkway that cut through the woods, Azaka awaited me, patient as ever. She, with her flowing hair, was a touch shorter than me. Unlike Ouji, who had the regality of a queen, the word princess suited Azaka perfectly. Well, a 'spirited' one, perhaps.

I walked over to her in silence. "Huh? Aren't you going, Shiki?"

Azaka suddenly posed an odd question. "Go? Where to?"

"Well, over there..." she trailed off, her words making no sense. She continued to stare at me, then at the depths of the forest, with a puzzled expression. And then, I understood.

"Azaka, do you know what time it is?" "It's just past two in the afternoon, but..."

Her words cut off in shock. It was already past three o'clock.

"Wow, you've been standing here for over an hour. Got a lot of free time, huh? Though I guess it's fine if you remember what you were doing earlier."

Azaka remained silent, her arm trembling slightly as she raised her finger to her lips. She stared into the air, unable to hide her surprise. It seemed likely that she had no recollection of what she had been doing while I was away.

"Shiki, I... there's no way..." her voice trembled in disbelief. Her tone was not one of fear, but of pure anger. For the bundle of pride that she was, the thought of being manipulated without her knowledge would be nothing short of humiliating.

"Needless to say, a fairy got you."

Azaka's face flushed red immediately. It was a mixture of embarrassment and frustration, a combination of shame and anger at her own inexperience. Her usual composure had shattered, displaying her vibrant emotions in their full glory. This uncharacteristic outburst was oddly endearing.

"We're heading back to the dorm. We need to change our plans," she said sulkily, striding off.

As I watched her go, I couldn't help but wonder how she'd react if I told her that I found her childlike honesty quite charming. Of course, there was no need to even consider such a thing. I decided to follow her in silence, just as I always did.

/2

After talking to some Class D students back at the dormitory, it was already starting to get dark outside. Despite it being winter break, the dormitory rules were still in effect, so we headed to Azaka's room.

After six o'clock, movement between rooms was prohibited. Students were only allowed to leave their rooms to use the restroom or the first-floor study hall.

Apparently, high school students who had just started attending Reien often disregarded this rule, only to be caught by the patrolling Sisters. Those who'd been there since elementary, on the other hand, were accustomed to it and rarely went out. Even if they did, they knew the Sisters' patrol routes so well that they never got caught. Azaka explained this in detail, settling into her chair. It seemed like she was just blowing off some steam, considering it wasn't relevant to our situation.

The first-year students' rooms were shared, and Azaka's roommate had gone home for the break. The room had two desks built into the walls and one bunk bed. Bookshelves and coloured boxes lined the walls, giving it a long and narrow feel. The dorm rooms were old, reflecting the age of the building itself, but had a calming atmosphere steeped in history.

As soon as Azaka returned, she changed out of her uniform and into her pajamas. I also wanted to get out of this stuffy uniform as soon as possible, but hadn't brought a change of clothes. Stuck in it, I listened to her on the bed

"Anyhow, there's not a lot more we can do here tonight. We'll have to call it a day. Wake-up call is at five, but there's no morning service during winter break, so you can sleep in until around six. Got that, Shiki? The other students and Sisters don't know we're investigating the Class D incident, so avoid standing out as much as possible. Unlike you, I've got two more years here. Don't cause any trouble, all right?"

Azaka repeated her spiel from the night before, but honestly, it was just a needless fuss. All I did was change the place I slept at. I still wasn't the least bit enthusiastic.

"Relax," I said. "My work here's just to be your eyes, I didn't even bring my knife with me. I don't have a personal grudge against the fairy user either, so I won't do anything reckless. Honestly, I'm more worried about you getting emotional and charging in."

"I'm perfectly calm. Our purpose is solely to uncover the truth, not eliminate the cause. Once we have all the information, Ms. Touko will handle it."

Though she deflected my concerns smoothly, her eyes were far from docile. The fairy encounter clearly bothered her, and she wasn't one to back down from a fight.

"I suppose. Well, *I* for one certainly hope that's true, Azaka." Her gaze snapped to mine.

"You're mocking me, aren't you?"

"Now you're just making false accusations."

Her disapproving glare, reminiscent of Mikiya's, made me laugh involuntarily.

"...Fine," she finally muttered. "I won't cause any trouble, so there's no need for you to worry about me. Now, back on point. Did you notice anyone strange among the people we encountered today?"

The conversation steered back on course.

"Strange? All of them were. Every single Class D student had *that* on their necks."

Azaka furrowed her brow. "The fairy blood, perhaps?"

She must think I'm a horrible person. Can't say I disagree.

"No, not blood. More like the scales on a butterfly's wings. Surely they would've noticed bodily fluids, right? And speaking of noticing, I just remembered—that teacher, Kurogiri, had it on him as well. I didn't realize it at the time, but it's definitely the same thing."

"I see… What do you think the reason behind the memory theft is?" "Beats me. Not my doing, that's for sure."

"Yeah, yeah, of course not. I had a lapse in judgment to even ask your opinion," she muttered sarcastically.

Lost in thought, she began piecing together the events.

"Since December, Class D students have been getting letters mentioning secrets they'd already forgotten about. At the same time, rumors of fairies began circulating around the school. Apparently, they visited during sleep and stole memories. Then just before winter break, an argument between two Class D students erupted into a fight with box cutters. Unsurprisingly, the letters were the catalyst. For a month, the Class D students were bombarded with disturbing personal details, information they themselves didn't recall. This constant mental strain left them so numb that they merely watched their classmates argue instead of stepping in. Talking to them made it clear—suicide wouldn't be out of the question."

She continued on with her tirade, showing no signs of stopping until she'd fully processed everything that happened today.

"Shiki encountered some *actual* fairies, and an entire hour of my memory is gone. What could I have possibly been doing? There's so much I could have accomplished in that

time..."

Azaka clearly felt shaken by the gap in her memory.

But what about me? My memory of my freshman year, four years ago, was riddled with holes too. Back then, the city lived in terror of a serial killer, who murdered people indiscriminately. I believed I was somehow connected to those events, but the one acting during that time was SHIKI. Now that he's gone, those memories are likely lost forever.

"...Oh."

A sudden realization struck me. Why hadn't I seen it before?

The lack of memories of the murderer was because SHIKI was involved. But then... Why did the moments directly before the accident still elude me? It should have been Shiki in control then, not SHIKI. Perhaps the so-called fairy user held the key to unlocking those forgotten memories, lost in oblivion.

Maybe I could reclaim my past.

Still, something felt off. Whether Azaka truly believed in fairies or not, I couldn't bring myself to accept their existence. A nagging feeling persisted, a sense that we had a fundamental misunderstanding of the situation.

"Say, Azaka. How are we even going to begin investigating lost memories?"

"I know, I know. It's not like we can hypnotize people and dredge them out of the depths of their brain. Are you familiar with the four main processes of memory, Shiki?"

"Encoding, storage, retrieval and authentication, right? They work like a videotape. You label the recorded footage and encode it, then store it carefully for safekeeping. When you want to watch it, you put it in the player and retrieve the data. Authentication is then required to check consistency with previous memories. If any one of these functions breaks down, the brain won't operate properly."

"That's right. Even if someone forgets something, as long as the brain itself hasn't malfunctioned, the memory will still exist somewhere. The brain never forgets what it has encoded, so I can only assume that these fairies are extracting them."

Fairies that steal forgotten memories...

Touko saw malice in their actions, but I wasn't convinced. After all, these were memories the person had already forgotten. They wouldn't even realize they were missing in the first place. Returning them as letters seemed more like an act of kindness, a way of saying "Remember this? Don't let it fade again."

"Perhaps the point is to destroy evidence. But why reveal forgotten memories then?"

The question tumbled from my lips.

"Maybe it *is* an accusation," Azaka mused, leaning back in her chair. "A way of reminding them of their past sins."

"But showing them different sins for a whole month? That's just childish harassment."

Touko had mentioned that fairies were akin to children, so maybe that's all there was to it. Still, I halted my train of thought. As a mere set of 'eyes', the burden of conclusion lay with

Azaka, not me. I rolled over and curled up on the bed.

"Hey, Shiki. There's something I want to ask you," Azaka, still seated in the chair, inquired hesitantly. "So, um... how *do* you find fairies?"

It seemed she was still terribly upset about her memories being stolen. But to be honest, I had no clue how to find them either.

"Who knows? If I had to put it into words, they're not something you're meant to see. But you're not going to listen, are you? Well, I guess you could try looking for warm spots or something. If you have good instincts, you might be able to catch one."

"Warm spots, huh?" Azaka nodded in understanding.

Despite the absurdity of it all, I wasn't exactly lying. After all, fairies were living beings, and living beings generate heat. It only made sense that they'd be warmer than their surroundings and attainable with some luck.

With that, the end of our conversation arrived. I borrowed Azaka's oversized pajamas, climbed into the top bunk, and drifted off to sleep.

Oblivion Recording/3

January 5, Tuesday. Since Shiki was taking too long to wake up, I decided to leave her behind and head for the study room on the first floor. It was just past seven in the morning. No student was diligent enough to be studying this early in the morning, which was why it would be the perfect place for a secret meeting.

The study room was a library within the dorm constructed for use by the students. While everyone had their own agendas, students would often spend their evenings in the study room until lights out. It was a place both for studying textbooks and fraternizing.

Unfortunately, the demonic Sister Einbach would come to personally tutor everyone in the evenings. This meant that students who wanted to chat or do some work-from-home odd jobs for money had to constantly evade her watchful eyes.

However, despite being a hub of activity in the evening, the study room was always empty in the early mornings. Taking advantage of that fact, I invited the class representative of Class D over to chat. I had talked to several other students after returning to the dorm yesterday, but they all kept repeating the same vague things. I didn't even know why I expected them to open up to an outsider like me.

Yesterday's failure meant that I had no choice but to bring the fight to them myself. The first rule of a battle was that it should be one-on-one. That’s why I chose the person that seemed the most coherent among them: the class representative, Konno Fumio.

As expected, no one else was in the study room. The heater was off, so it was awfully chilly inside.

"Over here, Kokutou," I heard her calm voice call out to me from further within the room.

As the study room was a sort of library, the inner part of the room was occupied by bookshelves. She hid in the gap between those bookshelves as she awaited my arrival. I shut the door and proceeded further inside.

To put it simply, she was a girl who seemed to lack the concept of grace. Just like me, she transferred into Reien in high school. Measuring in at over one hundred seventy centimeters tall, her immense height made her come across as quite intimidating. Seemingly having come to terms with her own boyishness, her hair was cut short. Despite that, she had an awfully mature face. If she wanted to, she probably could've passed herself off as a college student to strangers.

"I'm really sorry for calling you over so early in the morning."

It was our first time ever talking, so I gave her a bow of respect. She averted her gaze, crossing her arms as though she were attempting to poke fun at me.

"You're good. Not like I'd be able to sleep knowing I'm under the same roof as all of them. It'll be easier to distract myself if I keep my mind busy. Anyway, what'd you wanna talk about? Hayama?"

I got the impression that she was about as frank as it gets. Even though she knew that I was investigating the incident, she still decided to jump right into it.

"Hayama, like the teacher?"

"Who else would it be? I heard the rumors. You've been snooping around with some unknown beauty, haven't you? What else would the top student of Class A be here for but Hayama?"

Her gaze soon turned into a scowl. She had a good grasp on the events that transpired, just as I'd expected. I looked her in the eye, locking my gaze with her sharp glare.

"Honestly, I wasn't thinking about Mr. Hayama at all. That might've just been due to a lack of information on my part though. The truth is, Mother asked me to investigate the truth behind the incident that took place in your class. Do you remember what happened on that day?"

After hearing my question, she awkwardly grimaced in response.

"Straight from the big boss herself, huh? I guess you honor students really are a different breed. All she told me was to forget about it all and focus on my studies. Seriously, how am I supposed to just act like nothing happened?"

"You've been investigating too?"

"Of course. I *am* still Class D's representative, you know. Mr. Kurogiri and I are in the same boat. We were both right there, but we weren't able to do anything about it. On top of all that, our memories of that day have vanished completely. I can only vaguely recall that something of that sort happened, but that's it. The two who were involved, their names are Kashima and Ruridou. I haven't gotten to speak to them ever since they were sent to the hospital. I figured I'd go check up on the two and ask them about the incident, but Mother kicked me out when I made my way to the hospital," she said bashfully, fiddling with her glossy hair.

Seeing her do that instantly made a sense of affection for her well up inside me. "Did you get one of those letters too?"

"Yeah, I did. Talk about creepy, huh? I was on the fortunate side, but some of the others got

them every day. Both Kashima and Ruridou pulled the short end of the stick. It's no wonder that they felt so cornered."

She went on to talk about how most of the information disclosed in the letters was truly mundane. The sender wrote about things such as walking home with a crush in elementary school and lost cats.

"I wondered why they bothered writing something so pointless at first. It took a bit of time for it to all register. When it did though, I was more amazed than frightened. After all, those were memories that I'd already forgotten. Not everyone felt the same way, though. Some refused to talk to anyone else out of fear."

“Does that mean they had something incriminating written in their letters?" She nodded in confirmation.

"Do you happen to have any idea who the culprit may be?"

"Logically thinking, no one seems particularly suspicious. The problem is, logic stopped working long ago. If we're talking about spirits and fairies however, then I might have an idea."

She paused, electing not to divulge any more information. "But sorry, this is about more than just me," she added.

I decided to change my angle of approach.

"What do you think about the incident as a whole then?"

"Tough question. I can't deny that it's all very bizarre, but our class has been broken beyond repair since long ago. Maybe it's just some sort of divine retribution. You probably haven't heard, but most of the students in Class D transferred into Reien in high school. It's a class with a whole bunch of problem children, myself included."

I wasn't aware of this at the time, but I later found out that Konno Fumio was a well-known basketball athlete in her middle school days. She was the only daughter of the chairman of a medium-sized enterprise, and her father had sent her to Reien against her wishes.

"What about Mr. Hayama setting fire to the dorms?"

I steeled myself, recognizing that this would be the most critical juncture. She visibly winced as she averted her gaze from mine.

"I have no idea what was going through his head when he did it. The guy's a real piece of work. Did you ever get to hear his usual catchphrase? He was always complaining, asking why his brother wouldn't let him run the school.

Unbelievable, right? All of that coming from a guy who barely even graduated high school! That crook should've never been allowed to set foot here in the first place. It's his fault that Kaori died. His! And the director's to blame too for giving his jobless brother the opportunity to teach here. They're the ones that should be blamed! I didn't do anything wrong! Nothing!"

She was on the verge of tears, venting her frustrations without even looking me in the eye. As unshakable as she may have seemed, even she was at her wit's end by this point. I immediately understood that I wouldn't be able to get anything else of value out of her.

"Thank you for your time, Konno. You were a great help." I turned my back toward her.

"Wait, one last thing. Do you believe in fairies?"

Before I left, I offhandedly asked her one last question, as though I were conducting some unimportant survey.

"I don't believe in them, but I do think they exist. After all, my memories, and everyone else's... they're so messed up that I can hardly believe it."

I gave her a nonchalant response and exited the study room.

◇

I went around asking her other classmates after that, but all of them behaved in a similar manner. They'd all grown paranoid and holed themselves up in their own rooms. Even though they seemed like they were waiting for something to happen, all of them kept blabbering on about how much they wanted to go home. When I asked them why they didn't just leave, all of them went silent.

Which meant that Konno Fumio was the only one who was capable of holding a proper conversation. Everyone else was incoherent at best.

Regardless, I found out that all of them believed in fairies. In other words, all of them were sent letters and suffered from the same fragmented memories.

There was one other thing of value that I learned. All the students of Class D were hiding some sort of secret. While I didn't know what exactly that entailed, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that Hayama Hideo, their homeroom teacher, had something to do with it.

◇

I decided to head to the faculty room for further investigation. Hayama hadn't been sighted within the school since the fire in November, but I'd surmised that perhaps a clue was waiting to be found within the documents.

"Excuse me," I slid the door open.

Surprisingly enough, not a single soul was in sight. The faculty room was almost exclusively used for morning conferences, so the Sisters often had no reason to be there. In addition, none of the other workers were present because it was winter break.

"Thank you, dear God."

Expressing my gratitude to the Lord with a grin plastered across my face, I immediately began searching the shelves. I needed to check every single file from November of last year. I'd completely immersed myself in reading for about an hour. Unfortunately for me, there was nothing of value to be found.

"Well, that sucks. Looks like I'll just have to drag Shiki all over the place and have her search every nook and cranny."

As much as I didn't want to do the equivalent of wandering around town with a dobermann in tow, it was the only valid option we had left at that point. I began returning the scattered files to where they belonged. It was then that I doubted my eyes for a split second.

Hayama Hideo. Began employment in February of 1997, ended employment in December of 1998.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary at first glance, but something was clearly off.

Ended employment in December of 1998.

"That's impossible."

Hayama set fire to the dorms in the beginning of November, and proceeded to leave the school grounds forever. How could he have left his post in December if that were the case? Furthermore, it was stated that his reason for dismissal was the fact that he lacked a permanent address.

"You mean he's gone missing?!"

I was too stunned to think straight at that point, so I first put all the documents in place and left the faculty room. At that moment, I crossed paths with the last person I wanted to meet.

"Hm? What were you doing in the faculty room, Kokutou?" "Good morning, Mr. Kurogiri."

"It's already noon, though," he responded lightheartedly as I bowed to him.

I'd somehow managed the day before because I had Shiki with me, but I didn't want to spend a second longer face-to-face with Mr. Kurogiri. I'd always been unable to keep my cool around him. My heart began to pound with anxiety. I couldn't tell if it was purely due to my own unease, or if it was because he was the splitting image of Mikiya. None of it made sense to me.

"Do you have business at the faculty room?"

I made a crude attempt at diverting his attention. Despite that, he still provided an earnest response to my question.

"Mother asked me to do something for her. I need to transcribe the student roster into French. There are several universities over in France that Reien has maintained an amicable relationship with."

“I see. Does that mean she plans on sending the roster to them?"

"I suppose. In fact, you may actually be involved in all of this, Kokutou. You and Ouji are the two frontrunners for the exchange program."

It was the first time I'd heard anything about it. I brushed it off with a smile, and was about to slip past Mr. Kurogiri. I stopped in my tracks, having remembered something that I'd

been meaning to ask him about.

"Have you heard the rumor that's been making the rounds among the students recently?"

"You mean about the fairies? I have heard the rumors, yes."

"Do you think they're true? Oh, by the way, I don't believe in them at all."

I felt the need to chime in, thinking it'd be embarrassing if I gave off the impression that I also believed in them.

He smiled gently as he replied, "Anecdotes involving fairies are quite uncommon in Japan, but they're actually quite common in my homeland. I'm quite fond of the tales they tell of fairies that take the forms of cats and dogs myself. In Scotland, they're known as the *cat-sìth* and *cù-sìth* respectively."

I'd forgotten that Mr. Kurogiri was actually raised abroad. They say that universities there consider the study of fairies as a branch of folkloristics, so perhaps my query was not actually as juvenile as it seemed.

"If I recall correctly, the *cat-sìth* are those cats with long boots, right?"

"Oh, you've heard of them? Tales of talking cats exist within Japan as well, so the concept itself may not be all too original."

The intellectual turn our conversation had taken excited me. I took the opportunity to keep chatting with him a bit longer.

"Does that mean fairies do actually play tricks on people there? By the way, natural phenomena and indigenous practices that are viewed as such are what I'm referring to here."

"I haven't heard anything of the sort recently. I *have* heard the odd story of children being switched at birth, but stories of outcasts seem to have died out completely."

He then began a short lecture on the topic.

"The tales of brownies and knockers, two types of fairies that were traditionally known to help out at home or in the mines, actually originated from societal outcasts. Village communities were tight-knit, with no room for outsiders.

Because of that, people who came from other villages struggled to gain acceptance within another group. This resulted in them living within the mountains and forests, arriving to lend a hand when the season of harvest came in an attempt to curry favor. In the end, these 'inhuman outcasts' eventually came to be known as fairies.

On the other hand, the switching of children at birth is a more malicious example. Newborns of wealthy families would be interchanged with babies left on the streets. This practice came to be because it was once believed that wealth and status were symbols of God's blessings. The less fortunate desired the children of blessed families, leading them to secretly exchange their own babies."

"What'd happen to the babies after that?"

He responded with a smile as I posed a question.

"There's no need to worry. Most cases were resolved in no time. As the children belonged to

the wealthy, they naturally possessed the resources needed to locate them. Back then, all childbirth had to be officiated by the Church. Children who weren't baptized were treated as if they didn't exist. They quite literally would not be granted human rights. Because of this, even the poorest of the poor paid the Church to perform baptisms for their newborns. Torture was all that awaited them if they elected not to, so it was hardly even a choice. As such, resolving the case would be as simple as paying a visit to the Church and verifying the records. The only way for such a plot to truly succeed would be if real fairies were involved in it."

"So you believe in them?"

"I do. However, I'm not too fond of them. The tricks they play on people are a touch too extreme for my taste. Abducting babies is just one example of that. One day, after several years have passed, parents would find their lost children inexplicably returned to their homes. Many of these victims return with their mental development horribly stunted, leaving them subject to the ire of their parents."

He was right. That was quite a terrible trick to play. Perhaps the common perception of fairies as innocent beings ought to be corrected.

"Oh, I'm sorry for taking so much of your time. I got a bit carried away." "Don't worry, it was quite fascinating. Now, if you'll excuse me."

I bowed once again and proceeded to immediately take my leave.

◇

When noon came, I decided to visit the eastern dorm that burned down last November. I didn't have anything in particular that I hoped to accomplish. I just figured that I should at least see the scene of Hayama's crime with my own eyes once.

The building was cordoned off by ropes and no entry signs. I slipped past them and made my way inside the dorm. The majority of the building had been reduced to ashes. The eastern wall where all the rooms once laid was completely destroyed, almost as if it had been clawed down by some colossal monster. What little remained of the area was now so fragile that it seemed like a single push would be enough to send it all crumbling down.

On the other hand, the west side was in comparatively good shape. It'd be hard to believe that such a large fire took place if you only looked at the hallways. However, all that was left to be seen on the other side of the door was the vast campus and whatever remained of the foundation. The entire building had been warped beyond recognition, now resembling an avant-garde installation more than a dorm.

I'd only ever seen Hayama once. He taught the students from Class C to Class E, which meant he never came to my class. The one time I saw him, he was absentmindedly flipping through the pages of his bible in morning service with a bored look on his face. He looked to be around the age of thirty, and was quite good looking at that.

"How am I supposed to investigate someone I've only seen once?"

Complaining to no one in particular, I figured that it was about time to take my leave. I went down to the first floor and crossed the hallway, advancing toward the exit.

At that moment, I saw a familiar face walk through the entrance and straight in my direction. Upon seeing her long black hair and delicate features, I immediately recognized her as Ouji Misaya, the woman who ran Reien from the shadows. She continued walking toward my vicinity, eventually stopping about two meters short of where I stood.

"How has your little investigation been faring, Kokutou? Have you discovered anything of note?"

Looking me straight in the eye, she remarked with a gentle smile on her face. I instantly felt a chill run down my spine. I didn't know how I knew. But at that moment, I instinctively understood that she was the one who robbed me of my memories yesterday.

Chirp. Chirp. Chirp.

I heard the sound of some insects echoing throughout. I would only end up in the same sorry state as I did yesterday if I didn't make a move. This was my only chance to stop her, lest I lose my memories and waste hours of my time standing in a daze again. Since I didn't have my glove on me, I had little choice but to unleash my flames on her.

I glared at Misaya as she stood before me, and began surveying the area at once. I didn't know how I compared to Shiki, but when it came to heat detection and acceleration, I had full confidence that my skill would rival any first-rate mage. Locating an abnormally warm heat signature within the room was something I could easily do even with my eyes closed.

"Got you!" Detecting a presence right by my chest, I reached out and grabbed it with my bare hands. It immediately began to chirp as I held it within my hand, but that wasn't enough to make me avert my gaze from Misaya's.

"Oh? I could've sworn you said you couldn't see fairies yesterday. What changed?"

She began to speak with an air of confidence about her. Her arrogance only served to reinforce my recognition of her as an enemy.

"I see. That means I wasted a good hour chatting with you yesterday, huh?"

"Indeed. One hour was more than enough time to get to know you. Now, there's nothing about you that I do not understand. It's as easy as giving them a simple command, really."

She began to caress the vicinity of her shoulder. Again, I heard another one of those chirps, making it clear that there was a fairy on her shoulder too.

Except that wasn't all. There were several more heat signatures surrounding her. The presences I detected numbered over fifty in total. As I was unable to see them with my eyes, the difference in numbers signified my overwhelming disadvantage.

"You aren't surprised? I expected a more entertaining reaction out of you. When you told me about yourself yesterday, you left me so stunned that I doubted my own ears. I never even considered the possibility that there was another mage in this school."

"Why would I be? I already knew that someone was commanding the fairies before I even began the investigation. On the other hand, you promptly began scheming to eliminate me in a panic. I would've made the same decision myself, but your most crucial mistake is that

you willingly exposed yourself without any hesitation."

After saying my piece, I quickly began to plot my escape. My role was to identify the culprit, and nothing else. While I would've gladly taken her on in a normal battle, I had no intention of putting my life on the line in a deathmatch with another mage.

"You misunderstand. I have no intention of eliminating you, Kokutou. A fellow magus is not something you come across all too often. Don't you think it'd be a more productive use of our time if we tried to understand each other instead?"

"I don't get how you can say all that when you're the one who suddenly sent your fairies to attack me."

"Again, I have no intention of hurting you. The fairies are but a means to expedite the dialogue between us. It's truly such a shame that all the effort I put in yesterday has gone to waste," she said unperturbed, seemingly meaning every single word she said.

While simultaneously formulating an escape plan, I chose to listen to what she had to say for a bit longer.

"Are you saying that you want to talk to me?"

"Indeed. You chose to come here. That alone is enough to tell me that you are worthy of my respect. After all..."

"This is where Tachibana Kaori died, right?" She nodded in affirmation.

However, her eyes were clouded with revulsion. It was a cold gaze, like that of a merciless queen.

"She was from Class D, right? I heard she wasn't able to escape from the fire. Did you two have some history together?"

She nodded gracefully, as though responding to an obvious question. "She and I first met in elementary school. Ever since then, she was like an

adorable little sister to me. It seemed like no matter how many times she drew the short end of the stick, she just never learned any better. That didn't matter to me, though. She was more gentle, more pious than anyone else I knew. But now, she's gone. She was a tender soul who did nothing to deserve the end she met, but in the end, her own devotion convinced her to make the most painful choice she could."

I felt the pain in her voice as she mourned her friend. Still, there was no mercy to be found within her heart.

"They've shown no desire to repent for her death. Kaori threw her own life away, yet they act like nothing has changed. No human could be capable of something so cruel. The students of Class D are all sinners. Those monsters have no place in my Reien. Tell me, what sin is there to be found in disposing of garbage?"

"Do you mean that the students of Class D killed Tachibana Kaori?"

"If only... if only the truth were that simple, then perhaps there would've been no need to suffer so. Kaori killed herself, Kokutou. Then again, I doubt that you would understand what her death signified."

She looked upon me with a gaze full of disdain. There were too many things I didn't understand. I could tell that Class D was the reason why Tachibana Kaori died in the fire, but I hadn't the slightest idea of what she meant when she said that I couldn't understand.

“So what if I don't understand? In the end, your motive for doing all this is revenge, right?"

"Precisely. Those vermin ought to be banished to the depths of hell. I will not allow them even a moment of respite as long as they remain in Reien."

"Are you really... going to kill them?" I asked her bluntly.

It was a question I was certain I already knew the answer to. In the first place, she did not consider the students of Class D as fellow human beings. Thus, there was nothing that could stop her from murdering... no, from exterminating them. Or so I thought, until I saw her shake her head.

"Why would I? Killing them will not send them to the depths of hell where they rightfully belong. I told you that you wouldn't understand, didn't I? Regardless, your ignorance is no fault of your own. This is your last chance to leave. I do not wish to harm you."

She gently caressed the fairy on her shoulder once again as she spoke. "Though you cannot see her, she bears your memories within her. Beautiful,

don't you think? Your memories are cold, like a polished slab of marble, and yet a raging fire burns deep within them. I cannot peer within your memories, but their purity is evident to these fingers of mine. You are simply wonderful, Kokutou."

A slight chuckle escaped her lips.

For the first time in three years, for the first time since the day Mikiya introduced me to Shiki, I felt an overwhelming urge to utterly humiliate the woman that stood before my eyes.

...

She and I simply glared at each other in silence for a few moments. At this point, the word escape was no longer anywhere to be found in my personal dictionary.

She breathed a small sigh, "I see you've made your decision. I really do believe we could've gotten along, you know? Do you not feel the same?"

"Absolutely not," I responded instantly.

She chuckled in response, "Really, now? You and I are more alike than you think. For example, we've both fallen in love with our own brothers."

"Wh...wha?!" I was so dumbfounded that I felt like I was about to choke on my own words. I felt my cheeks growing redder by the second. "Wh...what are you..." I swiftly rushed to express my denial, but I'd already lost the ability to even form a coherent sentence.

She shut her eyes, a smile visible on her face.

"I did say that you told me everything about yourself yesterday, didn't I? I already know

about your brother, and your master too. You first learned magecraft half a year ago, right? I started around the same time frame too, although slightly later than you did. Do you understand how similar we both are now?"

Hearing the word magecraft was like a gust of cool wind, instantaneously bringing me back to my senses. Even then, it took me a moment to comprehend the words she had just uttered.

“I did it for revenge. After Kaori died, I learned how to make use of fairies in order to rob people of their memories. My magecraft was born not out of a desire to uncover the truth of the world, but rather of a simple selfish desire. For Kaori's sake, I will erase the memories of all the students who caused her death. When I am finished, not a single trace of the disgrace she suffered shall remain. That is all that matters to me. I have no intention of doing anything that will not serve to further my goals. See? I am neither destroying something with corporeal form, nor am I taking any human lives. Tell me, Kokutou. Could such a thing truly be condemned as evil?"

"Honestly, I really couldn't care less about all that. I came here to find out who's been threatening the students of Class D. Now I know that you're doing it because you want to avenge Tachibana Kaori. Tell me then, what does Mr. Kurogiri have to do with that?"

I saw her brow quiver in surprise. The fact that she was scrambling to justify her own actions with logic was reason enough for her to be condemned. Mr. Kurogiri only arrived after Hayama disappeared, in other words, after Tachibana Kaori's death. He had no involvement whatsoever with her suicide. Despite that, he had his memories taken away by the fairies.

"Taking Mr. Kurogiri's memories had nothing to do with your objective."

I said it as bluntly as I could. I realized that this was the greatest opportunity I had to break through the armor of logic that she had armed herself with.

However, in complete contrast to my expectations, she regained her composure in a mere instant. If anything, the strength of will behind her gaze had only intensified.

"It had everything to do with my objective. It was the only choice I had, in fact. He had no reason to be caught in the crossfire in the first place. The second he discovered the truth, it became my duty to take it from him."

I had no idea where that powerful conviction she spoke with came from. Even though I knew I was being pushed back, I couldn't just stand back and let myself be beaten down.

"But why?"

"Because he's my own flesh and blood… my own brother," she said as her long hair swayed gently.

"Your brother? Mr. Kurogiri?"

As I was about to instinctually express my disbelief, I realized that it was actually plausible. It'd require a series of unbelievable coincidences, but it wasn't theoretically impossible. Because all the children of the Ouji family were adopted, there was a faint possibility that she once went by the name Kurogiri Misaya.

She continued to speak, paying no heed to my disbelief.

"I didn't realize it at first either. After I found out about Kaori, I turned my suspicions toward Class D, just like you did. I went up to Hayama and pressed him for the truth. Once I had obtained it, the situation began to spiral out of my control, and the only thing I could do was turn to the new teacher assigned to them. Mr. Kurogiri kindly listened to everything I had to say. It pained me to take the memories of someone so gentle, but it was the only way I could understand him.

Though looking back at it now, I realize that it was actually a blessing in disguise. After all, the memories I took from him revealed to me that he was my brother. I did it because he'd found out the truth about Kaori's death. While it would've been easy for him to make his findings known, he chose to keep the truth to himself in a show of respect for her, even though he knew his conscience would torment him for it. When I asked him about it, he told me that he believed the wishes of the living ought to be valued over the wishes of the departed. His words weren't enough to deter me, though.

I refused to just let them off the hook, especially not when they were living without a care in the world despite driving someone to suicide. But most importantly, I couldn't bear to watch my brother suffer over something so disgraceful. His memories of the truth, and the knowledge that we share the same blood. I took them all away from him. All I desire is for him to live a life free of suffering, and for him to dedicate his love to me. As long as I have that, I won't ask for anything in return."

I was at a complete loss for words. She said that the two of us were alike. Perhaps she wasn't too far off. But still, that was all there was to it. She and I might have been alike, but we were nothing more than that. The forms our desires took, our wishes, and the effort we had put in couldn't have been any more different.

"You're only using him. You're taking advantage of his ignorance in order to protect their secret. You keep going on and on about loving him when you can't even admit to something as simple as that."

“That too shall come to an end soon. How many times do I have to tell you? You and I are alike. I understand the turmoil that you're going through. Perhaps I will be able to help grant your most cherished desire."

She held out her hand to me, in an attempt to officiate our alliance.

Meanwhile, I simply stared at her outstretched hand, as though I were looking upon a sworn enemy.

"I wouldn't mind letting you go, but only under a certain condition."

I offered a truce that I had no intention of upholding. But if, and only if...

If she truly did possess the ability to grant my wish, then I...

"That is, if you can help me recover my lost memories."

I would've taken that power of hers for myself, even if it meant killing her. "Your lost memories?"

"Indeed. I don't remember the exact moment I fell in love with my brother, you see. One

day, it simply registered to me that I was in love with him. So if you can help me remember what happened..."

"That's impossible. A past unknown to the person who lived it is no longer a memory, but a record. Unfortunately, my fairies are only capable of pillaging memories."

Upon hearing her response, I breathed a sigh of relief deep within. "No deal then."

All that was left to do was take her down. I formulated a plan at once. I would run up to her and knock her out with a single axe kick. As I silently shifted my center of gravity forward, she began to speak once more. With no lingering intent to let the conversation stretch on for any longer, I simply listened to her halfheartedly.

“Kokutou, you are aware that a familiar must be crafted from something that once lived, right?"

That was basic knowledge. I promptly understood what she was trying to say. I'd never cursed myself for being so quick on the uptake as much as I did in that moment.

"Do you have any idea what the fairy you've been holding in your hands was crafted from, then?" she said, giggling.

No sooner did I shift my gaze toward my hands. What once remained unseen to me, was now visible to my eyes. The fairy's appearance was quite different from what I originally envisioned. It had the face of a man I'd only ever seen once, a miniature Hayama Hideo.

I loosened my grip in surprise. By the time I recovered, Misaya's hand had already seized my head. My consciousness then proceeded to tumble straight downwards, as if I had just gone bungee jumping.

/3

...

"If memories are recorded like images on film, then why do we still forget them?" he asked.

"All memories eventually fade away on their own," I replied.

"That is only a lapse in your recollection. Although I am unable to record them, people's memories never truly disappear," he continued.

"If you can't recall them, then that means they are lost," I replied.

"Forgetting is a result of deterioration. Memories are never lost, they only fade away until they are nothing more than junk. Do you not find it a waste? Eternal though they may be, we allow them to rust of our own volition. Eternal though they may be, we allow them to wither to dust of our own volition," he said.

I offered no answer.

'The absence of eternity... is itself eternal.'

"Eternity must be restored to its rightful place. I shall retrieve your sorrow. Forget as you may, those memories of yours will always be recorded within you," he said.

"Who decides what's eternal?" I asked.

"I don't know. I've been searching for the answer to that question all this time," he replied.

And so I thought. As a man incapable of thought, the answer was not something he would derive himself, but something to be found within others.

...

A series of knocks on the door dragged me from my slumber. The sky outside the window

was a canvas of gray, making it difficult to tell if it was morning or afternoon. Looking at the clock, I saw that it was past noon.

"Kokutou?" a voice called from the hallway. "Are you in there?"

Groaning through a headache fueled by oversleeping, I lumbered out of bed and opened the door. Standing there was a Sister, who looked at me with a puzzled expression. She seemed confused to see a student that she didn't recognise.

"I'm Ryougi Shiki, transferring here for the third semester."

Understanding dawned on her face. "Ah, yes," she replied, explaining her purpose. They had received a call from Kokutou's household, so she had come to fetch Azaka. Given today's circumstances, the caller's identity was clear.

"Actually, Azaka's family and I are quite close. Perhaps I could take the call on her behalf?"

"Ah... you and Kokutou are relatives, aren't you? Then there shouldn't be any issue. The call has been transferred to the lobby phone. Head there quickly, please."

With a bow, the Sister left.

Leaving Azaka's pajamas behind, I slipped into my uniform and exited the room.

The lobby, situated near the entrance, held a dial-less phone I'd noticed yesterday in front of the sofa. Azaka had explained the system—external calls were routed to the dorm supervisors' room. If the caller wasn't a verified relative, it would be terminated. Only those deemed 'harmless' by the Sisters would be transferred to the lobby, allowing a semblance of privacy for the student.

The lobby was deserted as I approached the phone and picked up the receiver. "Hello, Azaka?"

The familiar voice of a man greeted me. It was Mikiya, as I had expected.

"Azaka isn't here. Calling her first thing in the new year, you're quite the devoted brother," I said, my voice deliberately cold for some reason.

Mikiya on the other end of the line hesitated, "...Shiki, why are you the one taking the call?"

"I told you, Azaka isn't here. She's been up and about since morning. I guess she's in a hurry to get things over with and come home."

"Is that so? Azaka doesn't seem to enjoy being home much. She says the dormitory is more relaxed."

"Relaxed doesn't mean she's content," I retorted, my words seemingly lost on Mikiya.

I imagined him tilting his head in confusion. Well, it didn't matter whether he understood or not.

"So, what's up, Mikiya?"

"Nothing much. Just wanted to check on how it's going."

"No clue. You should call again tomorrow and ask Azaka herself. Bye."

"Hold on, Shiki! We haven't even talked for a minute!" Mikiya's flustered voice echoed from the receiver.

Glancing at my reflection in the glass, I realized I was clenching the phone and scowling slightly. For some reason, I looked very angry.

“This is a call for Azaka, isn't it? There shouldn't be anything for us to talk about."

"There is! The truth is, I called because I was worried about you, Shiki. So let's talk a little more. Besides, the only way to contact you while you’re there is through Azaka. Didn't she tell you that?"

She did, but I declined to respond.

"No thanks. Phones aren't really my thing, so I'd rather not have an extended conversation."

"...I see. Now that you mention it, that's true. I guess it's goodbye for now. Reien only allows one phone call a day, after all," Mikiya said with a hint of disappointment.

I see... that's it for today, huh?

"Wait, Mikiya. If you have time, I have a favor to ask. I doubt I'll be able to find anything important here, so can you look into it from the outside? It's about Hayama Hideo, a former teacher at Reien, and Kurogiri Satsuki, his replacement. Could you investigate their careers before the academy?"

"Hm, I don't know. I can't say for sure until I try." A trademark Mikiya expression of affirmation.

"It's not that important, so it's okay if you can't find anything. Just don't push yourself too much. I need to find Azaka. She's probably wandering around by herself, so I'll hang up now."

"Ah, wait. I have a favor to ask too. There used to be this student named Tachibana Kaori at Reien. Could you look into her grades? Stuff like her attendance in Physical Education. Reien only keeps records in paper form, so I've been having a hard time trying to get them from the outside."

I was taken aback by Mikiya's unexpected request. I didn't understand why he was asking, but I figured there must be a reason.

“Got it. I'll give it a try if I have time." With that, I hung up the receiver with a click.

Oblivion Recording/4

Rest well, Kokutou. Within the hollow expanses of your slumber lies the sorrow that I shall retrieve.

I heard her whisper softly into my ears.

In a state of daze indistinguishable between dream and rest, I peered into the darkness with my eyelids still shut. I simply gazed upon eternity as I descended further into the dreamscape.

...

"I don't want that. I want to be special."

I vaguely remembered telling my father that once, but I could no longer recall when it happened. It was a memory of the distant past, so far gone that I couldn't even remember what I looked like back then. From as far back as I could recall, I only ever longed for a single thing, to be different. That single word bound me like a curse, and yet it was the only way I could live with my head held high. I didn't know why I started feeling that way. I just didn't want to be like the people around me. I wanted to be different.

A simple awakening, an everyday life, and a mundane slumber. I began to resent the people who were content with such a routine. I was me, and no one else. That was why I couldn't allow myself to be like anyone else. Of course, a mere child had no way of understanding what that really meant. Back then, being different meant outshining the people around me. I wanted to be more mature, but that meant forfeiting the right to carefree ignorance that was afforded to a child. I did whatever I could to acquire more knowledge while making sure no one around me suspected anything.

By doing so, I became more special than all the other children of my age. I didn't do it out of a desire to be praised as some sort of prodigy, nor did I do it so I could become an honor

student. After all, there was nothing special about that. All I knew for sure was that the 'different' I desired could never be adequately expressed with mere words. I didn't have to be the best. I wouldn't have minded being the weakest person in the room either. None of those would've brought me closer to my sole desire—to be special.

As I continued to sacrifice the things I didn't need, I began to feel a rift forming between myself and the people around me. The knowledge I'd stockpiled would hurt the people who tried to approach me, making them distance themselves in fear. Seeing that, I gladly did away with all the excess in my life. My friends, teachers, and even my parents began to revere me. At long last, I'd started to feel at peace with myself. Back then, I lived as if a desire to return to nothingness ruled over my being. I was in the midst of a journey, and felt myself regressing closer and closer to the state I was in before my birth.

A child such as I had no way of knowing that that was a mistake. There was no room for morality to interject when it pacified my urges. If I'd continued down that path, I would've grown up to become a different person.

Someone who was different from others. Someone who couldn't live with others. Someone who would only ever hurt others.

Eventually, I learned that I was only harming myself by enforcing such a way of life. I didn't have a prince on a white horse or a hero who arrived to show me the error of my ways. It came out of nowhere and taught me that I'd missed out on so much fun in my life.

"What are you doing, Azaka? There's nothing fun about playing by yourself. Come on, let's go home. It's already getting late."

There was a boy who always came to bring me home. I was always alone, and since I favored that solitude, his presence was an eyesore to me. I resented him. The only thing he had going for him was how average he was. Still, that didn't stop him from coming. He always smiled at me, a person who didn't even bother talking to her parents.
There was nothing behind it. He always came to talk to me without any sort of ulterior motive. Every time he did that, I mocked him for his stupidity in the back of my mind, and yet he still held my hand and dragged me back home without a care in the world. He'd done that because he was my brother, but I was certain that he would've done the same even if we weren't family. I wanted to be special, while he simply remained by my side. I began to feel a pricking pain in my chest, but it wasn't enough to stop me from living as I desired.

Why did it all change? For some reason, I found myself constantly chasing after him with my eyes. There was nothing special about it. It wasn’t like he rescued me when I was drowning in a river. He didn't save me from dogs, nor did he come to my aid when my parents were scolding me either.

For no reason at all, I fell in love with my brother. Was he just the type of person I longed for? In the first place, someone who tried to ostracize herself from her surroundings shouldn't have fallen in love. There truly was no reason for it. I woke up one day, and I was in love with him.

I was furious at him. I cursed the fact that someone who desired to be special had to fall in love with someone so unremarkable over and over again. No matter how much I lamented

it, there was no changing my feelings. I tried so many times to deny my emotions, but I couldn't take my eyes off of him. I'd go out to play on my own and wait for the sun to set while looking forward to the moment he'd come to fetch me. I couldn't shake the feeling that his ignorant smile ought to be resented, but at the same time, I began to long for it.

A simple awakening, an everyday life, and a mundane slumber.

I'd done whatever I could to distance myself from them, but I was wrong all along. I thought countless times about apologizing to him. Even though I'd treated him so horribly for such a long time, I never spoke a single word of apology. It was too late for that. I wanted to tell him I was just afraid to live the way he did, but I couldn't. I wanted to thank him for making me realize that, but I couldn't. Those were things only a carefree child, something I'd given up on being long ago, could say. Regardless, I couldn't help but wonder why. I had no recollection of ever being bested by him. He didn't win me over with some sort of sermon either.

In the first place, I would've surely turned the tables on him if he'd attempted such a thing. With an unexplainable change of heart came an inexplicable love. Before I even realized it, a passionate love was burning within me.

No. There had to be a reason. I'd just forgotten my most precious memory somewhere along the way. That was why I had to remember. When I did, I'd finally be able to take pride in myself, and believe in the truth of my love. Only then would I be able to muster an apology. Clumsy as that may be, it'd be an honest apology packed with my feelings of remorse.

...

"Wake up, Azaka. You're gonna catch a cold if you stay out here."

A familiar voice called out to me in a boyish tone, spurring me awake. Someone was propping me up and peering into my face, while the lower half of my body was resting on something cold and hard. I slowly began to realize that I had lost consciousness in the hallway, and that someone had come to wake me up.

"Miki..."

Noticing that the person before me was a black haired girl, I promptly shut my mouth before I could finish speaking. Shiki and I stared at each other in silence.

"..."

That was, until she suddenly retracted her hands. My upper body went crashing straight into the ground.

"What the heck are you doing, you idiot?!"

I immediately jumped to my feet as soon as my back came into collision with the floor.

“What? You're already awake." she said with a blank stare, clearly showing no remorse.

"Sure, I'm awake. Wide awake, all thanks to you! I don't even remember what I was

dreaming of because of you!"

"What? Did they get you again?"

I finally remembered what happened beforehand.

I was talking to Misaya, and then she used the fairy I captured to catch me off guard and knock me unconscious.

"Hm? That's weird. I'm absolutely certain she knocked me unconscious, but I don't think anything's missing this time. I remember everything that happened perfectly well."

"Did you get to see the culprit?"

I nodded in affirmation. As much of a disappointment as the truth was, the fact was that we'd finally identified the mastermind. I checked my wristwatch and realized that only a few minutes had passed since I was knocked out.

She'd probably intended on dealing with me one way or another, but then Shiki arrived before she could do anything, forcing her to retreat. Unfortunately, that meant I now owed Shiki an unwilling debt.

"Thanks, Shiki," I said as quietly and briskly as I could, making sure she couldn't hear me.

I then proceeded to tell her that the culprit was Ouji Misaya. "That's the tall girl we met yesterday, right?"

"Mhm. It hasn't been too long since we went at it, so she probably ran away when she saw you."

She nodded in response, putting her finger to her lips in rumination.

“What's up? Did you notice anything odd or something?" "Didn't she forget too?"

I struggled to comprehend the meaning behind her words. I did understand however, that they contained an important clue. If Misaya had also forgotten, then that would mean...

"Well, whatever. We're only human. We all forget a couple things here and there. More importantly, Mikiya gave me a call. He said to look into the records of some student called Tachibana Kaori."

"What did you just say?"

Those few words were enough to bring my barely functioning brain to a complete halt. I couldn't allow Mikiya to get involved with this case. He'd stuck his nose in some ghost incident in the summer and ended up in a coma for three weeks. Our parents didn't find out because Mikiya had already moved out, but he only managed to survive because Ms. Touko took care of him. He probably would've died in three days if not for her.

Ever since then, I'd done everything I could to prevent him from getting wrapped up in stupid cases like these. Unfortunately, one of his few talents was his aptitude for detective work, so he'd gone around investigating when the fire happened in November. Because of that, I hadn't told Mikiya a single thing about the incident at hand. I had no doubt that Ms. Touko kept it a secret too.

Despite all that, he'd suddenly called Shiki out of nowhere to tell us to investigate Tachibana Kaori's records.

"Well, duh. Who else would've done it? It's always only ever your fault, isn't it, Shiki?"

"How is it my fault? You're the one who wasn't there when he called. He's probably gonna end up calling again tomorrow, so you'd better stay put when noon comes."

Realizing that she'd taken my chance to speak to Mikiya from me, I scowled at her even harder than usual. On the other hand, she continued to speak, seemingly unaffected.

"He said to check her attendance record for Physical Education in particular. I hope you have an idea what he meant by that, cause I sure don't.

"Her attendance record?"

As I was trying to decipher if it was some sort of code, a flash of recollection suddenly struck me like a bolt of lightning. I'd just been told that Tachibana Kaori wasn't caught up in the fire. Instead, she was a victim of suicide. I'd missed out on the chance to force Misaya to divulge the most critical piece of information, and that was...

"The reason why she took her own life."

I swiftly broke into a run. I sped out of the ruined building, darting through the forest at full speed. I dashed as if my life depended on it. I knew exactly where I had to go. There was only one place where I could investigate her medical records and that was the infirmary.

I arrived at my destination, quickly uncovering her records and the days she had visited the infirmary. She'd sat out of gym class for the entirety of September. In addition, she had several absences in October, and didn't attend class a single time in the week leading up to the fire. I asked the Sister in charge of the infirmary to verify my suspicions, and she confirmed that Kaori had come for a consultation. Together with a painful discovery came the realization that I held all of the cards needed to unravel this case.

/4

As the sun set, the remaining students on campus made their way back to their respective dorm rooms. The Reien curfew was six o'clock, after which the students had no freedom. Having finished our communal dinner at the cafeteria, Azaka and I also returned to our room.

Outside the window, the world was already enveloped in the dark embrace of night. The only sound was the rustling of trees in the wind, and the dorm was filled with an eerie silence that sent shivers down my spine. I fancied the solitude of this place. If not for the mandatory dorm life, I would have seriously considered transferring here. Regular high schools were just too noisy.

With those thoughts in mind, I sank down onto the bed. Azaka carefully locked the door and turned around, her long hair flowing behind her.

"Shiki. You're hiding something, aren't you?"

Her index finger raised, Azaka stared at me intently.

"I'm not hiding anything. In fact, *you're* the one keeping secrets from me."

"I'm talking about material things. Stop stalling and give me the knife you swiped from the cafeteria earlier!" Azaka demanded in a confrontational tone.

...I was taken aback. She was right. I'd secretly slipped a cafeteria bread knife into the sleeve of my uniform. But the fact that someone noticed it meant that my stealth skills had gotten rusty. I had been openly carrying my weapons lately, so I wasn't used to hiding them anymore. And to be caught by an amateur like Azaka – what a disgrace.

"It's just a bread knife, for crying out loud. Nothing for you to worry about, Azaka."

Realizing I'd been seen through, I mumbled in a sullen tone. Azaka, ignoring my excuses, pressed closer.

“No way. I don't care if it doesn't have an edge. Once any knife gets in your hands, it becomes as deadly as an expanding bullet. I can't have another death at the academy."

"What's the big deal now? There've already been two. We're way past worrying about stuff like that now, aren't we?"

"No. Murder and accidental deaths are entirely different. Now, hurry up and hand it over. Our job is to investigate the cause, not solve it."

"Liar. You're clearly itching to."

Determined not to give up the knife, I glared back at Azaka as she approached.

I wasn't carrying it around just for fun. I hadn't told her about it, but I had a strange feeling when I woke up this morning. Something had assimilated with my consciousness while I was asleep, though I wasn't sure if it was a fairy or not. But if it dared come back again, I wasn't letting it get away. That's why I needed the knife as a weapon.

Besides, I liked the intricate design of the Reien tableware. I intended to keep it as a souvenir when I returned home.

As I remained silent, Azaka had closed the distance even further. "You're not going to hand it over, are you?"

"Oh, shut up. You're so annoyingly persistent. No wonder Mikiya keeps flaking on you."

I flung the New Year's incident from a few days ago at her, which only made her even more angry. Big mistake. The emotion in her eyes drained away, like a tide going out.

"Understood. Time for force."

Muttering those words in a chilling voice, she lunged at me. Stuck on the bed, I couldn't dodge her sudden attack. We ended up tangled together, crashing onto the mattress.

In the end, Azaka managed to pry the knife away from me. Despite her cute looks, she was easily enraged. When she got really mad, she would go ballistic, like a wounded bear. Judging that words and counterattacks were pointless against this beast, I reluctantly handed over one of my hidden knives to end the silly scuffle.

Azaka took the knife and walked over to her desk. I, on the other hand, remained lying on the bed.

"You muscle head... Look at my arm, it's covered in bruises. What do you even eat?"

"How rude. I only eat a modest amount of bread and fresh vegetables." Azaka didn't even turn around as she put the knife away in her desk drawer,

locking it with a click. I sat up again on the bed, watching her back. Against my better judgment, I blurted out something that came to mind.

"But I'm honestly surprised. I had no idea you were this athletic, Azaka. You could probably pin Mikiya down with ease."

Her face turned bright red instantly. Even from behind, I could see the heat radiating from her ears.

"W-W-W-What are you talking about?" she stammered, whipping around to face me. She was definitely blushing.

"Nothing. Just an observation. No offense meant."

The real issue was probably *why* the thought even popped into my head, but I decided not to overthink it. Azaka remained fixated on me, her blush lingering. I met her gaze with an almost indifferent expression. After the clock's second hand had ticked about a hundred times, she inhaled deeply and opened her mouth.

"As expected... you know, don't you?"

"Perhaps. Besides, I wasn't the one who noticed. At least the person in question seems oblivious, so there's that. No harm done, right?"

Azaka let out a relieved sigh, patting her chest.

It wasn't me who had discovered her feelings for Mikiya. SHIKI was the first one to meet her, immediately seeing right through her facade. Shiki only gained that knowledge because it'd been passed along in the process. Without that insight, I wouldn't have picked up on it alone. The pieces clicked into place: her harshness towards him alone, the way she avoided using the term 'brother' when he wasn't around.

As Azaka regained her composure, a new glint appeared in her eyes.

"Still, your nonchalant attitude is infuriating. Are you really that unfazed, Shiki?"

Azaka seemed determined to pick a fight over something that went over my head. I tilted my head in confusion at her cryptic question.

"Are you fine with me stealing him away? Seriously, you really do infuriate me!"

She repeated the line, her frustration evident.

But who was she referring to? From the flow of the conversation, it had to be Mikiya. But he wasn't mine to begin with. He's… I hated to admit it, but he didn't belong to me, the current Shiki, but the…

No, that path was forbidden. A shiver ran down my spine, and I shut down that train of thought.

"What do you even see in him, Azaka? I mean, you're siblings."

I spat, a barbed comment laced with self-deception.

"Hmm, let's see..." Azaka mused, her gaze flickering across the room.

"To be honest, Shiki, I have this attraction to things I consider special. Or rather, I'm drawn to things society deems taboo. So, Mikiya being my brother doesn't faze me in the slightest. He might have an issue with it, but I don't. In fact, I actually find it rather appealing. Like some stroke of luck to have a love interest so close," Azaka said, her voice utterly calm despite the outrageousness of her words.

Seriously. That guy seemed to attract strange women like flies. "You pervert!"

"Says the freak!"

Almost simultaneously, Azaka and I hurled insults at each other. It was a genuine exchange

of our viewpoints, free of any hatred or contempt.

...

Azaka, with an investigation planned for early morning, drifted off quickly. Being a night owl myself, sleep remained distant. Even after the hour hand struck two, I didn't feel a hint of drowsiness. I simply stared out the window at the scenery outside, lost in thought. Outside, there was no light, only the deep darkness of the trees. No light pierced the dense forest, and the dormitory was as silent as the deep ocean.

I fiddled with a cafeteria knife with one hand, my gaze lingering on the trees and the inky expanse. The truth was, I had procured two of them. One to use here, the other a souvenir. Unfortunately, Azaka had snagged the decorative one. Now, all I could do was hope the remaining knife wouldn't be needed, a hope that dwindled by the minute.

"Quite the busy night, isn't it?" I muttered to myself, my eyes fixed on the spectacle outside. Countless fireflies, like flickering lanterns against the Reien night, danced in the darkness. There were more than ten or twenty of them, numbering far more than the one or two from the previous night. This unusual surge in fairy activity likely coincided with Azaka and me sniffing around for clues. The fairy user seemed to have drastically accelerated their plans.

"Doesn't seem like I'll have a choice though," I murmured, staring at the knife, whose surface dimly reflected the moonlight.

This was my last night in Reien. No matter the outcome, it was clear the resolution would arrive tomorrow.

Oblivion Recording 5/

◇

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do anymore," I said.

"There is no need to despair. What is fractured must simply be made whole again," he answered.

"How am I supposed to do that?" I responded.

"I will take care of it. You have committed no sin of your own. You must not tarnish your beauty with their filth. Remain as you are now, forever unchanging," he continued.

"Beautiful? Me? I have strived for that ideal my entire life, but I do not know if I have attained it," I replied.

"You must remain pure, unsullied by any. Struggle as you may to suppress the darkness that grows within you, those hands of yours are not yet stained with sin," he remarked.

He nodded, and then proceeded to smile gently.

"Those beautiful hands of yours must not lose their purity. Such filth is a blight upon this world. The only way to be truly rid of them is to allow them to extinguish themselves. Any who dare to erase them will only serve to inherit their corruption. This fiendish cycle is what we refer to as a curse. To protect you from being defiled, we must prepare another," he added.

I stood in place, daring not to break the silence. After all, even then, that'd only mean...

"Eternity must be restored to its rightful place. I shall retrieve your sorrow. Forget as you may, those memories of yours will always be recorded within you," he carried on.

“But I haven't forgotten anything," I interjected.

"Forgetting is but a defect of the consciousness. None can escape from the grasps of oblivion," he explained.

"I don't understand. What is it that I lack? What memory will fill this void within me?"

"Those fantasies you harbor toward your brother," he expressed. "If you so desire, then I shall retrieve the defect that lies within you."

I nodded in affirmation.

◇

January 6, Wednesday. As had been the pattern for the past few days, the sky was once again enveloped in gray clouds.

"Seven-thirty."

The first thing I did after waking up was check the time. In a sick twist of fate, I'd somehow managed to oversleep for a whole hour. I hastily rushed out of bed and changed into my uniform. I tried calling out to Shiki, but she showed no signs of awakening from her slumber on the upper bunk bed.

She'd been up late last night, judging from the fact that she'd gone to sleep in her uniform. She never seemed to mind whether it was cold or it was hot, so she was sleeping soundly with a single blanket. Seeing her slumbering tranquilly like a statue, I decided to leave her be.

We were only here to find out what was causing this string of incidents. The reason why we didn't bother chasing after Misaya last night was because we didn't need to. Though we came to find the culprit, we had no obligation to actually capture her. Then again, she had no reason to remain in the dorms after what happened yesterday. I later found out that she'd asked Mother for permission to leave the school after we went at it.

On paper, she was no longer present anywhere within Reien. I took it as a sign that she no longer had any intention of trying to approach me. Regardless, she was both quick-witted and surprisingly impulsive, so the possibility that she hadn't completely given up on winning me over was still there.

On both of the days that she attacked me, she'd been unable to fulfill her goals only because Shiki appeared. While it was highly unlikely that she'd come face us again with her cover already blown, perhaps she believed the third time would be the charm. I made sure to stuff my glove crafted from salamander hide in my pocket before leaving, just in case.

As I wandered through the cool hallways, chilly as a refrigerator, I visited a few of the students of Class D along the way. Most of them weren't even in their rooms, and the few that were couldn't even hold a coherent conversation. They were all breathing heavily with an unfocused look on their eyes. It almost seemed like they were in a state of drug-induced stupor.

While Shiki may have just scowled back and forced them to talk, I could hardly bring myself to waste my time on people who were glaring at me like I was some sort of enemy.

It was time for a change of plans. I left the dorm, deciding to try asking some of the faculty instead. In order to make up for lost time, I briskly extracted all the information I needed from the Sisters. When I arrived in my room to sort out all the information I acquired, Shiki was still fast asleep. I sat down, realizing that it was foolish of me to expect that a substitute pair of eyes would be capable of providing any valuable insight in the first place.

I swiftly got to work. I already had a good guess regarding Kaori's situation from everything I learned at the infirmary yesterday. There was nothing out of the ordinary about sitting out of gym class. The Sisters had no choice but to accept it if someone had a heavy period, for example. Because of that, it was rather simple to get approval to sit out of gym class.

In this case, the truth only came to light when I matched up her health records with her attendance sheet. I was unsure of how it worked in other schools, but Reien kept a list of the students' menstrual cycles. According to that list, she'd used her period as an excuse to sit out gym class on a day that should've normally been impossible.

Instead, the implausibility of it all made me consider another possibility. When I questioned the nurse yesterday, she confirmed that Kaori came for a consultation regarding her delayed menstrual cycle in October. She reassured her that it was only a temporary effect of stress, but the nurse only came to that conclusion because she didn't know the whole truth.

While it was only just conjecture, I suspected that her period wasn't just delayed, but hadn't come altogether. In other words, well, she had gotten pregnant. That would've been reason enough for her to commit suicide.

It may have just been a vague suspicion at first, but she eventually began feeling the baby inside her grow day by day. In the three month period between September and November, she must've been driven into a corner completely.

Within the confines of Reien, pregnancy was an even graver sin than murder. It meant that a student who had no right to leave the school grounds had broken the rules, and even engaged in intercourse. If Mother and the Sister found out, her world would've come tumbling down in an instant.

In addition to the ostracization she would've been subject to, there was no doubt her parents would've been furious too. She'd spend her days in fear of being discovered, unable to find a way out of her predicament. The only way to get an abortion was to go to a hospital. Even if she did manage to sneak out, whatever doctor she went to would've surely contacted the school. She was a student of Reien from as early as elementary school, so there was no way she could’ve known of those back-alley doctors who operated without a medical license. All she could do was cower in fear of the day her stomach would visibly swell like a convict awaiting her execution.

As I didn't know her personally, I had no way of actually knowing if it had happened consentingly. However, Misaya made it seem like she wasn't the type of student to break the rules. In other words…

“She was assaulted within the school. So it was that bastard Hayama, huh?"

Everything finally fell into place. Hayama got her pregnant, eventually setting fire to the dorms on her third month of pregnancy to erase all the evidence. It was such a crude and

simple scheme, but it was enough to convince me it was the truth.

There was just one more thing I had to consider. The nurse told her that her menstrual cycle had been delayed because of stress. I couldn't bring myself to just write it off without thinking it through. Her statement implied that she knew Kaori was in a situation that would've caused her stress. Something was going on that the teachers were aware of, but couldn't do anything about. The students of Class D were all hiding some sort of secret.

"Bullying?"

I had a hunch that I was on the right track. Most of the students of the class transferred into Reien in high school. It wouldn't be too odd if a devout Christian like her couldn't get along with any of them. Still, their class representative was Konno Fumio. Someone with a strong sense of morality like her wouldn't just stand by and watch if something like that happened. There had to be a compelling reason for it, a reason that would've alienated Kaori from her classmates.

"Did they know that she was pregnant?"

That certainly would've explained it. They persecuted her for engaging in an act that led to her pregnancy. She was unable to confide in the nurse, while Fumio watched as it all happened under the assumption that Kaori had willingly committed a grave sin. Out of remorse for driving her to suicide, the entirety of Class D agreed to keep her pregnancy from coming to light.

"No, something's still off."

I had no idea what piece of the puzzle I was still missing. While I excelled at piecing together different fragments of information with my intuition, I always struggled to find the pieces of evidence that would corroborate it all. That sort of investigative work was Mikiya's realm of expertise. If I were a detective capable of deducing the culprit's tricks with my flexible train of thought, then Mikiya would've been a policeman who relied on traditional methods to gather the evidence needed.

I always hated the smug detectives who belittled the hardheaded police in mystery novels. They only flaunted their superior intelligence, identifying the culprit just because they'd arrived at a certain possibility despite not having any solid proof. Despite that, they always mocked the police as inept for relying on traditional methods.

To me, it seemed like the *detectives* were the ones who were inept. An inspector's job was equivalent to finding a single jewel buried in an entire desert. They repeated their tedious processes over and over again in an attempt to mold the uncertain past into a shape that'd convince the masses.

Still, those detectives would rather blabber on about their own delusions and find the culprit that way. They elected to abandon the effort needed to uncover the jewel buried in the desert, only choosing to convince themselves.

A layman arrives at an answer by constantly weighing all of the facts against each other. A genius, on the other hand, relies on flashes of inspiration to arrive at their own unique version of the truth.

Some cases can only truly be solved by a detective. However, it wasn't the laymen who were

devoid of imagination. If anything, it was the geniuses who were constantly confined by their beliefs. Geniuses were destined to be alone, never understood by those around them. After all, that was the only path afforded to them.

"I totally lost my train of thought." I leaned back into my chair at wit's end.

Sighing in frustration, I took a peek at the clock. It was just around noon. As usual, the weather hadn't changed. While I wondered whether it'd rain anytime soon, I heard a knock on the door.

"Are you there, Kokutou?"

It was a familiar voice, belonging to one of the Sisters.

"Is something the matter?" I responded as I went to get the door.

She then proceeded to tell me that I had a call. I soon realized that it was from Mikiya, and promptly made for the lobby.

I arrived at the deserted lobby and took the phone. "Is that you, Shiki?"

I heard a voice I'd gotten used to hearing ever since my childhood. My hunch was right on the money.

"She's still asleep. You called Reien just to talk to your girlfriend? Wow, how caring of you," I said as callously as possible.

I heard Mikiya stumble on his words for a second.

"That's not why I called. I wanted to know if you two made any new discoveries."

"That's none of your business. I told you before, didn't I? You should stop sticking your nose in this sort of stuff."

"I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't need to, you know? I can't just sit by and watch when both you and Shiki are involved."

As much as I wanted to tell him off, I felt oddly moved by his words. Seriously, what a chump. Even I was surprised at how half-baked I was being.

"What are you here for? Did you come to talk to Shiki or me?"

"Shiki's the one who asked me to look this up, but I guess you'd make better use of this information. I found some stuff on Hayama Hideo and Kurogiri Satsuki."

I gasped in astonishment. I obviously knew that Mikiya told her to investigate Tachibana Kaori, but I had no idea that Shiki asked him to sniff around too. I took a moment to mentally curse Shiki's brainlessness.

"You just said Shiki asked you to do it, right? I've told her time and time again to stop putting you in danger, but she never listens. Can't you tell that she doesn't even care what happens to you? Why else would she be so happy to shove all the dangerous work onto you? You really should consider finally breaking up with her, and I mean it."

I tried to express my discouragement, but he didn't seem fazed by it, seeing as he just chuckled in response.

"Shiki's unable to express her concern in the ways a normal person would, that's all."

He seemed oddly giddy, but I absolutely couldn't comprehend why. In frustration, I urged him to spit out the results of his investigation already. I heard him flipping through several pages. He must've gathered quite a lot of material, considering he had them bound in files. I realized he wasn't calling me with his personal phone, or with a payphone.

"Where are you right now?"

"At the office. Touko's out with Detective Akimi right now," he said sullenly. I couldn't hold back my shock.

"Detective Akimi? You mean she's with Daisuke?!" Mikiya replied in affirmation, seemingly upset.

Akimi Daisuke was our father's brother as well as a police detective. He was the youngest among their family, which made him practically an older brother to us. He was particularly close to Mikiya, so much so that an onlooker might've even mistaken them for brothers.

“Apparently he's her connection in the police force. I told him about my boss when we met on New Year's, then he went all 'Wait, are you talking about Aozaki Touko?!' on me. Touko said that she couldn't refuse an invite from an employee's family, so they're out on a date right now. Basically, he used me as bait so that he could get to her," he grumbled, clearly discontent.

It certainly didn't require a stretch of the imagination to believe that Daisuke was one of Ms. Touko's sources of information. He was known as an oddball even within the First Investigation Division, so it actually made quite a bit of sense.

"Anyway, back to the point. How much do you know about Hayama Hideo?"

I sensed that he was trying to probe me with his question. Familiar as I was with the unseen ways he showed his consideration, I immediately realized that he was looking out for me.

"There's no need to worry about me. I have a good grasp on what sort of person he is, so it'd take quite the massive revelation to surprise me."

I felt him pause in hesitation for a brief moment, before he eventually resumed speaking.

"Basically, he wrapped his students up in a prostitution ring. He'd take his students out to town and make them sell themselves for money."

"What?!"

I was so surprised that those were the only words I could muster. Mikiya continued speaking, paying no mind to my confusion.

"I don't know what he made them do in particular. He wanted to make use of the perceived rarity of a Reien student, so I doubt it was anything too extreme. In order to keep their value up, he had to play his cards sparingly. Apparently, he only took them out twice a week, and only a few people at a time, at that. I don't know if he was bold or just reckless, but he made good business. He was quite the big name in some of the seedier parts of town, you see. They say he threw around a lot of money. He ended up spending more and more with every day that passed, eventually ending up with a massive debt. You know how those bars work. The backers behind them are actually yakuza, so that meant he ended up owing

money to a criminal organization.

With a massive debt and no way of paying it back, he turned to his brother in desperation. He promised that he'd devote himself to his post and slowly pay back his debt, but apparently he'd planned on wrapping the Reien students up in his schemes from the very beginning. You understand why, right? Aside from the prestige of the school's name, most students of Reien have the added benefit of being the only daughters of industrialists. I haven't been able to work out some of the finer details yet, like if he had a single target at first, but eventually folded to the yakuza. Anyway, they made full use of everyone they could get a hand on, and practically the entire class was in on it by September. That's the gist of the story."

He then proceeded to report the names of the students involved, the order and dates they went out, and even the times of their return. Needless to say, he'd also made sure to look up the yakuza organization that Hayama had gotten himself wrapped up with.

"As much as it pains me to admit, I couldn't find any concrete evidence," he muttered weakly.

The files he'd gathered wouldn't have been enough to get the police to move, and even if they were, there was a high chance the students' parents would do something about it. The whole scandal had gone beyond the scale of just Tachibana Kaori. If the truth got out, the school's very existence would've been threatened.

"I'm sorry, Azaka," he said as soon as he finished conveying all of his findings.

I was too shocked to think for a while, but I finally had it all sorted out. At last, everything finally lined up. The secret that the entirety of Class D was hiding wasn't Kaori's suicide, but the existence of the prostitution ring. While Hayama may have threatened them in order to get them out at first, he wouldn't have been able to keep everything secret for half a year without their cooperation.

According to Mikiya's findings, while most of them were forced to participate against their will, some of them did it of their own volition. They chose to become Hayama's lackeys for their own protection and enjoyment. Having graduated from ordinary middle schools, many of them struggled to adapt to the prohibitive restrictions placed upon students of Reien.

To them, Hayama was practically the serpent of temptation. If they simply pushed all the blame onto Hayama, there'd be no need to feel any guilt. That was why they all worked to keep it secret. Of course, the blame wasn't solely theirs to shoulder. If anything, the entire situation only came about because of Reien.

The school existed in its own little bubble, with a constant obsession to impede the entry of any foreign substance. Not even a single breeze of fresh air from the outside world could penetrate its walls. The slow, languid wind that permeated its confines was proof that it was protected from any corruption of the outside world. However, the air only grew stagnant without being allowed to run its cycle. There was no verdance to be found here. There was only the stifling, turbid air that suffocated all who breathed it. If Reien truly did exist in detach from the outside world, there would've been no need for these walls. After all, they only ever served to keep us from escaping this prison.

"How'd you find out about Tachibana Kaori? You made it sound like you already knew about her when you told us to look up her records."

I fired off my final question.

"Ah, the girl who died in November, right? You were at the office for a bit after the fire happened, remember? I looked into it a little back then. I was investigating something unrelated to work back then, so I figured I might as well take the chance. I had to hound Daisuke to get him to show me her autopsy reports. Until the end, they couldn't determine whether she'd died in the fire or of a drug overdose. There was something odd that stood out to me, though.

The report said that there was a possibility she was pregnant. Of course, they couldn't say for certain because her corpse was damaged in the fire. Oh, just so you know, I doubt that someone used the fire as a distraction to kill her.

Regardless of the cause of her death, it's almost certain that she committed suicide. She was the last of the class to be roped in, you see. Obviously, that meant she held out against Hayama for as long as she could. In the end, she was forced to take part in an act she didn't consent to, and ended up pregnant.

No sixteen-year-old girl would be able to handle that sort of despair without the help of the people around her. If you ask me, I believe that she may have had the chance to escape the fire, but chose to remain in her room instead. In other words, she willingly chose to end her life."

After he hesitantly gave his opinion, I expressed my agreement.

"That sounds about right. I don't get why she didn't just have the baby aborted, though. I'm sure Hayama could've done something about it if she'd just told him."

"Because she was a woman, perhaps? Maybe she couldn't bring herself to get rid of the baby."

Upon hearing his rather prejudiced answer, I became convinced of something else. That was why she had been ostracized by her classmates. She refused to have the baby aborted, which meant that the class' secret would've eventually gotten out. All of their lives would've been ruined if that happened.

They didn't need Hayama's orders to target Kaori. They had to make sure they didn't hurt her too hard, though. If they'd resorted to full-blown violence, then the teachers would've surely caught on. There was also the possibility that she would crack under the pressure and confess her sins in an attempt to repent. She lived under those hellish conditions for three months, irreversibly defiled, all the while being shunned by everyone around her. Even then, she refused to blow the whistle on her classmates out of the goodness of her heart, eventually being left with no option left but suicide.

What a...

"What a weak person she must've been. If she had the resolve to throw her life away, then she could've also handled the ramifications of her pregnancy. Only a loser would give up on everything by resorting to death. She's been here since she was a child, and she lost to some people who came waltzing in from the outside?"

I grit my teeth in frustration as I imagined her kind smile that I'd never gotten the chance to see. I couldn't even sympathize with someone who was willing to throw everything away like that, but Mikiya was quick to voice his denial.

"You're wrong. Do you know how painful it must've been for her? I only realized it because of what you just said. It was a suicide, yes. However, it wasn't for the reasons that you and I, and most other people, would've expected," he said bitterly, as though he were in pain.

I had no idea what he was trying to say.

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean? Humans commit suicide because they can't bear the pain anymore. She couldn't find a way out of her situation, so she chose to escape by dying. The only people who can't take their own lives are people who don't possess anything of value. In other words, people whose deaths would've been meaningless in the first place," I rebutted.

"You wouldn't understand," he countered. *Misaya said the same thing to me yesterday.* "Why wouldn't I?"

"You told me she'd been in Reien since she was a child, right? That'd mean she was a devout Christian. Azaka, Christians aren't allowed to take their own lives. Suicide is equal to eternal damnation to them. Their religion preaches salvation at the end of one's natural life. Thus suicide is viewed to have an equal, or perhaps even greater weight than murder. She didn't, no, she couldn't have committed suicide for her own sake." His voice cracked with anguish. I was at a loss for words. I'd completely forgotten about her faith. Unlike Buddhism, Christianity denied the existence of the cycle of rebirth. This meant that there was no guarantee that one would be granted salvation in the afterlife.

I was aware of that, of course, but it simply existed within me as knowledge. Since I'd only begun attending morning service in high school, those values didn't have enough time to ingrain themselves in my thought process. However, someone who was raised Christian like her must've abided by such beliefs strictly, as if they were a code to live by. In other words, suicide was an even more frightening prospect than death to her.

"But then why did she do it?"

I ended up at the same question, unable to find a convincing answer. Whatever the answer was, I was certain it was out of my reach. Someone as coldhearted as me couldn't even begin to understand someone like her.

"I think she was trying to atone. She didn't take her own life because she couldn't bear the weight of their sins. She decided to shoulder the weight of all their sins, and atone for them by damning herself to hell," he replied.

"I told you "

I sat in silence, unable to utter the rest of the words.

I told you that you wouldn't understand, didn't I?

That was what she told me yesterday. Her anger was the real thing.

She understood Kaori's sacrifice on a deeper level than anyone else, and that was precisely why she couldn't bear to watch the students of Class D pretend like nothing had happened.

Killing them would not send them to depths of hell where they belong.

She was right. Taking their lives with her own hands wouldn't be enough to damn them. If she wanted them to meet the same end Kaori did, murder would've served no purpose. That was why she slowly drove them into a corner, as though she were tightening the noose on their necks day by day. They would never be granted a chance at repentance. All that awaited them was a pitiful death by their own hands, unable to bear the exposure of their sins to all.

5/

The cold rain continued to fall relentlessly. Even Shiki, usually impervious to the heat or cold, felt a chill. She stood in the downpour, the biting cold rain stinging her face, a small knife clutched in her hand. Her blank gaze was fixed on someone, when...

...suddenly, I jolted awake.

A 'fairy' flitted across the empty space before me. In one swift motion, my eyes snapped open as I pulled the knife from my clothes and lunged. It pierced the wall with a resounding thud. Skewered between the blade and the wall, the fairy-like creature squealed. Just as Azaka described. The humanoid creature clawed at the knife with its tiny hands, before succumbing to its wounds and dissolving.

"Damn it. I should have held off for a little longer," I muttered, closing my mouth.

What would have happened if I had held back a bit? Could I have recalled the events of Ryougi Shiki's fateful day three years ago? The car accident that left her in a coma for two years, an event completely absent from my own memories. Could I really have recalled that incident?

"This is getting on my nerves."

With a short burst of frustration, I leapt out of bed. A faint creak echoed from the hallway—someone had been peeking in moments ago, and they were now attempting to flee.

I tucked the knife back into my sleeves and stepped out of the room. The corridor stretched east and west. The fleeing figure disappeared into the eastern section. The silhouette was unmistakably...

"...Ouji Misaya. There's no way... she could have mistaken me for Azaka, could she?"

If so, I was the target here. Azaka had instructed me to stay put, but a little payback was in order. I sprinted down the creaking wooden corridor, hot on her heels.

Ouji was faster than I anticipated, and the distance between us remained largely unchanged. She bolted out of the dorm without a second thought and headed straight for the school building. After passing the walkway in the woods, she reached her destination. But instead of entering the school building, she veered towards the structure next to it—the chapel.

Of course, it was a trap. But turning back now would be ridiculous. With a sigh, I casually shoved open the heavy chapel door. It swung silently open, revealing a single shadowy figure within the dim light.

I slammed the door shut and faced the figure. Standing about ten meters away, they silently adjusted their glasses, their gaze fixed on me as if observing a sculpture.

"Oh, if it isn't Ryougi?" a faint smile played on the man's lips. "What brings you to the chapel at this hour?"

The smile was soft, like a child's, yet utterly devoid of color. It was an empty gesture, lacking any genuine emotion. Kurogiri Satsuki stood before me, his dry smile plastered on as usual.

Oblivion Recording/5

"Next up is Kurogiri Satsuki."

I heard Mikiya pull out another file. Frankly, I didn't really care what he'd discovered about him. Now that I'd found out all about Class D and Hayama's secret, our mission was complete. The same went for Misaya. The safest play was to leave everything else to Ms. Touko to prevent any further casualties.

"Mikiya, I'll go grab Shiki and ask Mother for permission to leave. You just wait for us at the office."

"I think you'd be better off hearing this. He's not completely uninvolved with this case either."

"Are you serious?"

"I am." he replied instantly.

He seemed oddly calm as he spoke, which was quite unusual for Mikiya. Hearing his reply was enough to give me the hunch that Mr. Kurogiri was of even more importance to this case than Hayama.

"Are you saying he was wrapped up in the prostitution ring too?"

"No, it's something completely different. He had nothing to do with Hayama and Class D. Anyway, back to the point. Do you happen to know where he was born?"

I tried to remember. He obviously had a Japanese name, but he'd spent a long time abroad. I couldn't deny the possibility that he had Japanese parents but was born in a foreign land.

"I can't say for certain, but considering how much time he spent in the United Kingdom, there's a high chance that his hometown is over there somewhere."

“You're right. He was born in the remote countryside of Wales. There's more to it, though. He was actually put up for adoption at age ten. The name Kurogiri Satsuki was given to him

by his foster parents. Don't you think that's strange? Obviously he'd take their surname, but why'd he have to change his first name too?"

It was quite odd, but if his foster parents truly desired to treat Mr. Kurogiri like their own child, then that'd be a decent enough reason to get rid of the name given to him by his birth parents. Then again, I'd never heard of anyone changing their entire name upon adoption.

"I asked someone who knew him back then. They said that he was considered a prodigy by everyone around him. He was practically the perfect child. Yet for some reason, his parents were desperate to get rid of him. Even when they put him up for adoption, no one was willing to take him in. After a decent amount of time had passed, a Japanese couple from a distant town heard the rumors and decided to take him under their wing. I was able to look up his school records from after he moved out, but for some reason, I couldn't find anything from before his adoption."

His parents didn't want to raise him any longer. I felt like a dark past such as that didn't fit my image of him. Regardless, I was more preoccupied with the fact that Mikiya had somehow found someone who knew all about his past in Wales. I couldn't even begin to imagine what sort of information network he needed to find all that out.

"Why did his parents want to get rid of him so badly? He was supposed to be a prodigy, right? Did they not have the money to raise him or something?

"That's the problem. He was only considered a prodigy until he turned ten. From then on, his mental capabilities were stunted. I couldn't find out if it was some sort of neurological disability or something, but he apparently became unable to store memories. His brain couldn't record anything he saw with his eyes. In other words, his disability stopped him from living the life of a regular human being. That's probably why his parents were so eager to get rid of him."

“He couldn't store memories?"

It felt like my brain had just taken a direct hit to the core. After all, Mr. Kurogiri's symptoms were almost identical to what had been happening in Reien.

"Are you really sure? Mr. Kurogiri is a well-educated guy with a good recollection. He's nothing like you just described."

"That'd be because he recovered. He wouldn't have been able to get a teaching license if he still had the same symptoms. All I'm saying is that there was a period in his life when he couldn't store any memories. He regained his genius intellect some time after he was put up for adoption. After that, he enrolled in university at the age of fourteen, and even got a doctorate in linguistics. Despite his promising future though, he transferred from school to school as a member of the faculty. Taking into account his past, it’s not unusual that he chose to teach at Reien, nor that a student at his school took her own life."

"You mean there were more of them? Students who committed suicide at the schools where Mr. Kurogiri worked."

"Normally, it wouldn't be too out of the ordinary for a student to commit suicide these days. The problem is that it's happened in every single school he's worked at, and it was

always after he left the post. Obviously there isn't enough definitive evidence to prove causation, but just how many times can the same incident repeat itself?"

I immediately began to rack my brain. In every school he worked at, a student would commit suicide following his resignation. Did that mean that he was also involved in this case?

I'd discovered only yesterday that he was a mere accessory to Misaya's schemes. He had his own memories stolen away from him too, which was why he had no idea what was going on with Class D. In other words, Misaya was the puppetmaster of this string of incidents. I really didn't want to believe that someone who was so much like Mikiya could do something so horrible.

Well, that's about everything I have to say. Everything else is up to you, but promise you won't do anything reckless, okay? Make sure you have Shiki at arm's length at all times. Oh wait, one last thing. I heard a rumor about the meaning of his name. Apparently the name Satsuki's supposed to be some sort of translation of the word mayday. I have no idea what that's supposed to signify, though."

It wasn't the word mayday, but rather May Day. May Day referred to a day of festival. On the first of May, people would celebrate the arrival of the summer sun. That certainly explained how they ended up with Satsuki. After all, in the lunar calendar of Japan, the fifth month of the year was referred to as Satsuki.

"That's it."

As my mind struggled to take in everything, I finally arrived at the answer. There was a reason behind the name Satsuki. It took me a while to realize because it wasn't a celebrated holiday in Japan, but...

"There was a reason why he lost his intellect, right?"

"Hm? Well, there were certainly some rumors about it. They say he was spirited away. He disappeared for three whole days, and when he returned he was suddenly unable to remember anything."

"Right. It all happened because he *really was* spirited away. May Day is similar to Halloween and Midsummer, you see. You're much more likely to run into a fairy on days like those. Mr. Kurogiri's clock must've stopped ticking during that time."

I swiftly put the phone down. I remembered what Ms. Touko had told me a few days ago.

Fairies are notoriously difficult to control. Often, mages find themselves fulfilling the fairies' demands rather than the other way around. Always exercise utmost caution when dealing with familiars that are not born of your own flesh and blood. If you don't, you may very well end up being the one in servitude instead.

She had already given me all the clues I needed. If the puppetmaster was really just another marionette, then I'd been making a fundamental mistake the entire time. I didn't even know why Tachibana Kaori had resorted to suicide.

A past unknown to the person who lived it is no longer a memory, but a record. If Misaya could only take memories, then someone else had to have sent the letters that disclosed forgotten truths. No, there was a much more fundamental question I should've asked

myself long ago, and yet I'd somehow forgotten all about it.

Who taught Misaya how to use magecraft in the first place?

◇

"Mr. Kurogiri's clock must've stopped ticking on that day," she said with a tinge of hostility in her voice, abruptly ending the call.

"Azaka?"

Silence was all that came back to him. Mikiya put the phone down and sunk into thought.

"She must've made a massive discovery," he said to himself as he returned to his seat.

January 6, just past noon.

Mikiya was the only one in the office. His superior was out on business of her own, but his presence was quite odd, considering he was on leave that day. Of course, he had only come to work because he had a goal in mind, and that was to check on his sister Azaka and his friend Shiki.

He'd been terribly worried about them ever since he found out they were kicking off the New Year by investigating some sort of strange incident. Since he had no idea what the investigation entailed, he had no way of telling whether they were in danger or not. In the first place, he wasn't even supposed to know that they were working on a case.

He thought that Shiki seemed oddly disgruntled when she came on the day after New Year, so he stealthily tried to draw out as much information from her as he could. All he found out was that Shiki was supposed to infiltrate Reien by pretending to be a transferee.

He looked into it himself and got in touch with a couple of his contacts before eventually being asked by Shiki to investigate Hayama Hideo and Kurogiri Satsuki. Having heard about the fire in November, he started his investigation from there. In fact, he'd only just wrapped everything up an hour before he called Azaka. Needless to say, he hadn't had a single wink of sleep since he called Shiki yesterday.

"Well, I doubt anything bad is going to happen to them with Shiki around."

He stretched his back, worried about his sister. Repositioning himself in front of his desk, he began to plan his next course of action.

"I'm beat."

Though he understood that he couldn't afford to waste any time asleep, he began to fall into slumber.

He remembered something within his hazy, slumbering consciousness. Ever since he heard that Shiki would be wearing a Reien uniform, he'd been looking forward to seeing how out-of-place she'd look in it. Unfortunately for him, he never got the chance to do so. The

reason was simple, it was Touko's single comment upon seeing her in the uniform.

"Splendid."

That one word was enough. Mikiya obviously had no idea what was so splendid about it, but Shiki immediately changed right out of it after that.

“You'll catch a cold if you sleep on your desk, Kokutou." "I'm up."

Mikiya raised his head and surveyed his surroundings. He looked at the clock, realizing it was past three. Since he'd spent over two hours asleep at his desk, his body had been thoroughly exposed to the cold. It was the midst of winter, so it was his fault for falling asleep without any sort of heater.

"When did you get back?"

He turned around and looked at Touko.

"Just now,” she answered with a cigarette in her mouth.

She was dressed in a coat with a listless look in her eyes, seemingly starved for entertainment. He promptly realized that meant Daisuke had put up a valiant fight but ended up coming short.

"Haha. You must've been pretty bored, huh?"

He was always on the receiving end of her banter, so he figured he'd get one in while he had the chance. Unfortunately though, he was met with an answer contrary to his expectations.

"Not at all. It was pretty pointless, but it wasn't boring,” she replied as she pulled a can of coffee out of her coat pocket and placed it on Mikiya's desk.

"Here, a souvenir."

Despite being quite the shoddy gift, it was exactly what he needed to warm himself up. He opened up the can of coffee and swiftly began sipping it.

With the same listless look in her eyes, Touko glanced at the files on his desk and casually picked them up.

“Oh, that? Those are just some files on the teachers that Shiki asked me to investigate. I doubt you'll get any fun out of reading them."

She nodded in affirmation, proceeding to browse through them regardless. She stood beside Mikiya's chair perusing the files for a bit. She was indifferently flipping through the pages, then suddenly stopped when she saw Kurogiri's photo.

"The Book of the False God, God's Word."

The cigarette in her mouth fell to the floor. She opened her eyes wide in shock, as though she had seen a ghost.

"Unbelievable. What's the Master of Babel… the Unified Language Master doing teaching a bunch of high school students?! The Association's been trying to hunt this guy down! This has got to be some sort of joke,” she said, laughing silently.

She wasn't laughing at him in mockery. If anything, it seemed like a weak, dry laugh was all she could muster to hold back her sheer astonishment.

"Kurogiri is a mage?"

She shook her head in response to his question. With a twisted grin on her face, she hastily took her seat. She scowled at the ground deliriously, like a black panther who had just had its collar removed. It was proof that she had recognized Kurogiri as some sort of abnormal entity.

"The documents Mother sent me didn't have his photo. I may have made a mistake letting Azaka handle this. I should've just taken care of it myself. No, even if I did, I'd only end up another victim in his pile of stolen memories."

Mikiya could only sit there puzzled, contemplating what kind of metaphor Touko was getting at when she mentioned stolen memories. Still, he felt that he had to make sure.

"Azaka and Shiki are investigating him right now. Is there any possibility that he might harm them?"

“I highly doubt it. According to the rumors, God's Word never harms other people. In the first place, he isn't even a mage. He doesn't have any latent aptitude for magecraft, nor is he descended from a family of mages. He was born with some genetic mutation, just like Azaka was. Similarly, just as Azaka's only ability is to control flames, his sole gift is the command over language.

However, because these abilities are part of their innate disposition, they are capable of reaching heights that even bloodlines spanning generations such as mine cannot hope to achieve. In that sense, God's Word is a monster. It took him only ten years to attain those heights.

When I reached the Master class in my twenties, I was convinced I was the youngest to ever do it. However, the truth was that there was a boy who did it in a mere fifteen years. I never got to meet him because he belonged to an institute in the Middle East, but every student of magecraft knows his name. The Master of Babel, God's Word May Day. The mage who is closest to magic, and the only one capable of replicating the Age of Myths," she continued, stifling a chuckle.

It seemed more like she was talking to herself in an attempt to calm her emotions than she was actually speaking to Mikiya.

"His real name and history are all unknown. Even among those of the Atlas Institute where he belonged, I doubt many know the truth. Most mages have never even gotten the chance to see him. Because only his appearance and ability are known to all, many mages in London believe he doesn't even truly exist. The magecraft he utilizes is exactly as his moniker suggests: God's Word. He has complete command over every language spoken by any race or tribe that currently roams the world.

When I say complete, I don't just mean that he can speak them. He knows everything that has ever emerged from them, beginning from their conception. Their history, their beliefs, all of it. There exists no word that he cannot speak, and there exists no race of man that is unknown to him. However, he did not acquire this knowledge by traveling the world. God's Word learned only a single language, and his understanding of every other one is nothing more than a consequence of that. Surely you've heard of the Tower of Babel, right? It's a myth about the gate of God that's been passed down in Babylon."

“The spiral tower that Bruegel painted, right? If I recall correctly, mankind built a giant tower with a shrine on top so that God could have an easier time reaching them from the heavens. Instead, God believed that attempting to reach the heavens was proof of man's arrogance, so he struck the tower down and confused all their languages, scattering them across the world to ensure they never made the same mistake."

"Precisely. The Tower of Babel is the oldest myth in the history of mankind. While there are many things that this myth signifies, the most important one is the confusion of languages. God scattered mankind across the world. However, he didn't do it based on their appearances or the colors of their skin. He used the most fundamental and basic principle he could, words. The greatest barrier in communication isn't the color of one's hair or eyes, it's language. God must've believed that without the ability to understand each other, mankind wouldn't be able to create anything like the Tower of Babel.

In the end, that didn't stop mankind from flourishing and becoming the Primates of this world, even conquering the barrier of language. Anyway, back to the point. God confused the words of man. This happened when man still acknowledged the existence of Gods, in other words, the Age of Gods. Back then, what we now consider the arcane was just an extension of their common sense. It was what we of the present day call a world of ‘swords and magic’.

Arcana that are now impossible to replicate in the modern age were nothing but child's play back then. Now, why was that? The consensus among mages was that it was due to the rotation of the earth, the position of the moon, and the rivalries born from the turn of the stars. They theorized that those filled our planet with ether.

It was God's Word that proved all of them wrong. He showed that it wasn't only our planet that was more powerful in the Age of Gods, but also our language. If God confused the languages of man, then what was it like before that? Indeed, mankind had but a single language of communication back then. Could a language truly give meaning to and speak of every single phenomenon in our world? If it truly existed, then it would have to be a formless language. It would not be a language used to communicate with fellow men, but a language that derived its meaning through a dialogue with the world itself. God feared the word of man, so he confused our tongues and granted us a language with form. We thought we were being granted wisdom, but we were only robbed of the truth instead.

That lost truth is what God's Word has learned, the original language that was shared among all who dwelled in this world before the Tower of Babel. We call this the Unified Language, and God's Word is the only mage capable of replicating it. The Master of Babel. The ability to communicate with every single being that lives is none other than a gate to the Fount, to God himself. If you trace its etymology, the word Babel once meant the gate of God. Then again, God's Word doesn't possess any other ability as a mage, so he'll never be able to pass through that gate himself."

In contrast to Touko's cynical smile, Mikiya had a confused look on his face. Having only understood a portion of her lecture, he had to ask for a clarification.

"So he can talk to literally anything?"

"Pretty much, but it's only a one-way street. In the Age of Gods, everyone was capable of

communicating with each other because they all spoke the Unified Language, but now only God's Word can speak it. He can speak to beasts, and even rocks, but they won't be able to communicate their own intentions back to him. If we're just talking about humans though, then obviously they can respond in their own languages."

"Isn't that useless then? What's the point of it all if no one can even reply to him?"

"If it were just a normal language, then yes. The fact that he can communicate with beasts and rocks doesn't mean that he's speaking to them directly. Instead, he speaks to the world itself. Think of it like an ontological hierarchy. As long as 'I' exist, there will always be an Aozaki Touko above me that exists within the world itself. If he were to use the Unified Language on me, I would have no way of resisting. If I were to reject his words, that'd be equal to denying the fact that I exist in this world. The very words he utter become an irreversible truth. God's Word is capable of placing all of creation under complete hypnosis.

The memories that we humans possess, are also recorded by the world itself. It's a similar concept to the Akashic Records, but this is a wave phenomenon that exists on a lower level than it. You see, one of the possible methods of deciphering it is the Unified Language. That's why Kurogiri's able to gather memories that have already been forgotten. He isn't drawing their forgotten memories out of their brains, but rather from the record the world stores of the past. In the present day and age, he's the only person capable of accessing the various recordings of the past that our world has kept in store. When you take that into consideration, it's no surprise that he was branded with a Sealing Designation."

Having finally calmed down, Touko sank deep into her chair and took a deep breath.

A Sealing Designation was only granted to those who were deemed by the Mage's Association to possess irreproducible abilities. It meant that whoever was branded with one was to be sealed by the Association in order to preserve their miraculous achievements for all of eternity. While it was the greatest honor a mage could be granted, it also came with a multitude of problems.

After all, there was no way for a mage to continue their research after being sealed. A mage's only purpose was to continue to reach for greater heights, and yet the Association desired to preserve them as samples. Unable to bear with such a disgrace, most mages who are handed a Sealing Designation go on the run from the Association. Of course, God's Word was one of them. If Touko told the Association he was here, they'd capture him immediately. However, she wouldn't, no, she couldn't do that. After all…

"They'd end up finding *me* too, goddamnit," she cursed, looking up at the ceiling.

Azaka and Shiki had no way of winning against God's Word. However, they didn't have any reason to be in opposition with him either.

“Can't do anything about it this time. Well, I doubt anything too bad will happen," she casually remarked as she lit a cigarette.

Mikiya gazed at her in uncertainty.

"You doubt? Based on what you just told me, Kurogiri is an extreme threat. Shouldn't you go and help them?"

"I told you God's Word wouldn't do anything, didn't I? He doesn't even possess any means

of attacking them. As a mage, he's even less than third-rate. No matter what they do to him, he won't even dare to harm them. His only purpose as a mage is to give form to the wishes of others. He doesn't possess any of the skills needed to be considered a mage. The only reason we all refer to him as one is because of his unchanging belief. He's become an idea that only seeks a single goal."

"A single goal? What is it that he's after, then?" he posed a simple question.

The act of recording oblivion in itself was a clue to the nature of God's Word all along. Despite that, no one suspected a thing. First and foremost, who would've ever expected that a man who was considered a living treasure in the realm of magecraft would be teaching in a small school in the corner of the country?

"His objective is simple. He's been chasing after something that people like us couldn't care less about. How should I put it? Hm, eternity sounds about right. God's Word has been seeking eternity all this time. Even with the gifts he has, he insists on chasing after a fantasy. No, perhaps I have it backwards. It's because of his gifts that he can only chase after an unsolvable problem. After all, countless people have dedicated their lives to chasing after the fantasy of a mirage. Like I said, there's no need to worry," she explained as she put the cigarette in her mouth.

She took a long, deep breath in as she blankly gazed toward the ceiling.

"Unfortunately for him though, he'll never reach it. Even though you can find eternity anywhere you choose to look."

As she exhaled, the smoke slowly began to drift away.

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Bathed in the soft gray light streaming through the chapel's windows, stood the teacher Kurogiri Satsuki. His expression was a gentle smile, his gaze devoid of both hostility and compassion as he observed me.

"Oh, if it isn't Ryougi? What brings you to the chapel at this hour?"

He addressed me in a casual tone, showing no signs of reprimand for my abrupt intrusion. For a fleeting moment, his appearance overlapped with that of Mikiya, causing a mild dizziness to wash over me.

But Kurogiri Satsuki was nothing more than himself, and I retrieved the knife from the hem of my clothes. Upon seeing the tiny scalpel-like blade, his face clouded over.

"Please, put that away. You might end up hurting someone with it," he cautioned, as if soothing one of his students.

I ignored his words and scanned the chapel. There were no signs of other people, not even their presence lingering in the air. The female student who had rushed in here a moment ago was nowhere to be seen. Or perhaps... had Kurogiri been the only one here from the start?

"Where is Ouji Misaya, Mr. Kurogiri?"

I ceased my observation and fixed my gaze on the teacher standing before the altar, who lowered his head slightly.

"Ouji isn't here. But I believe the person you're looking for is me. It wasn't her, but Kurogiri Satsuki who had been gathering oblivion here."

His gentle smile remained plastered on his face as he spoke. There was no deception in his voice, and I readily accepted the fact that this man was the culprit behind the incident. No surprise. No outrage. The truth abruptly revealed felt like an event I had known all along, settling into the recesses of my mind. It was as if I was under a carefully woven hypnosis.

“What do you mean by that?"

Despite understanding his words, I asked a pointless question. My tone, though natural, held a steely edge. I had decided that there was no longer a need to maintain the mannerisms of a woman my age.

Kurogiri met my glare with a faint, apologetic chuckle.

"Precisely what I said. The person you're looking for is me. The fairy you encountered earlier wasn't my doing, mind you. It seems Ouji didn't understand you very well. A counterfeit fairy wouldn't stand a chance against you, yet she sent it after you anyway. An artificial creation, yes, but a living being nonetheless, carved from the essence of life. How tragic, to be used as a disposable pawn."

He closed his eyes, seemingly in genuine sorrow. A silent prayer for the fallen fairy, perhaps. As I watched him, I pondered for a moment. My role was to assist Azaka in uncovering the cause of the incident. But with the enemy right before me, there was only one thing to do. I was going to...

"You misunderstand, Ryougi. Unlike Ouji, I'm not a fairy user. Partitioning my thoughts to control so many familiars simultaneously is beyond me. That's a talent unique to her. All I can do is record words. I'm practically uninvolved with these fairy incidents. You shouldn't use that as a pretext to consider me your enemy."

"Wha..."

"However, that doesn't mean you and I are unrelated. For the sake of our karma, I will lend Ouji my assistance just this once."

Kurogiri opened his eyes. They were still those of an ordinary, unremarkable teacher.

"I shouldn't have been involved in this case at all. You, too, were an unexpected variable. But given our connection, it is only appropriate that I would be the one to handle you. Stopping Ouji is Kokutou's duty, and hers alone. All that's left is to see whose abilities will prevail."

A sigh escaped his lips.

"So, if you were to have an opponent, the only one left would be me." "But why? Outside the Reien incident, we have no reason to fight."

"Is that so? You loathed reliving your forgotten memories, didn't you? That's why you rejected me yesterday. Stealing existing memories is Ouji's domain, but collecting oblivion? That's something only I can do. You chased her this far, intending to kill her for taking your memories, right? Well, then, that makes me your target," Kurogiri spoke softly, his smile unwavering.

I found myself unable to even nod. Just as he said, I hated revisiting my own memories. That's why I instinctively crushed any fairies I encountered. Even now, I'd chased Ouji, the fairy user, all the way here with the intent to end her. The fact that my target had swapped to him didn't change how I found it unacceptable.

Yet, just like before, no anger flared within me. Even though he should have, this opponent emanated no malice, no danger. This... was unprecedented.

Despite facing an 'enemy,' I felt strangely emotionless. This unsettling state finally sent a

shiver down my spine. Still, I couldn't bring myself to kill him.

"Unacceptable!"

Fueled by a loathing chill, I focused intently on Kurogiri, still smiling softly. I perceived his black lines of death, a spiderweb intricately woven across his body. However, this also meant that he was susceptible to death from any path. Never had I seen someone so riddled with mortality.

His faint smile held somber eyes.

"So, the Mystic Eyes of Death Perception, I see. I view only streams already traveled, while you perceive trails yet to be trodden. Chronicler of the past and observer of the future. Hm... it seems Araya summoned me to eliminate you, Shiki."

Sorrow flicked in his narrowed gaze.

But it was a single word, more than his demeanor, that made my vision flash white. A new kind of animosity surged through me. Araya. No doubt lingered after that name.

"So, you're a mage, Kurogiri Satsuki..."

He was the enemy, then. I clenched my knife tighter. My strange state of mind had to be his doing.

It had to be.

I needed it to be.

This opponent, I could kill. This opponent, I *had* to kill.

The moment conviction settled, a part of me, unseen to my own eyes, seemed to chuckle…

◇

Locking eyes with the man I was about to kill, my heart pounded heavily in my chest. Resemblance to Mikiya wouldn't earn him reprieve. If he was a mage, then he was like me, someone who existed outside the boundary. So... it wasn't murder. After all, Kurogiri wasn't a human who lived among the masses.

Calmly controlling my body, itching to explode forth, I envisioned a single, decisive blow. I would dash towards his body, riddled with openings, and thrust my knife vertically into his throat. Leaving the blade embedded, I would swiftly drag the knife down his body in a single breath, and then it would be over. An easy execution. Three seconds from now, the outcome is crystal clear.

And yet. My mind conjured the image of a young man's corpse, limbs severed. My heart pounded again, a heavy thud. My breaths are erratic, fueled by tension. This had never happened before. Hesitation, ragged breaths — all because he reminded me of Mikiya.

"Shiki, that's not right," the mage, who was just standing there, spoke abruptly.

My body reacted, lunging forward… only to be met with a desperate, herculean effort to suppress it.

This was wrong. Something I absolutely could not do...

Clarity struck, and my breaths grew even more erratic. I still... couldn't harbor killing intent towards this opponent. I couldn't attack him. This man who mirrored Mikiya… The thought of killing him, the very act itself, sat heavy on my chest.

Not reluctance, but something worse. Envisioning it left my throat parched, my tongue numb, with an unbearable dryness. The fear of succumbing to it made me clamp down on my legs with desperate force.

Yet, my body craved the kill, a resolution to Shiki's grief, her suffering. It knew... it would bring solace. But then... would I, someday, repeat the past? Would I try to kill my friend, Mikiya, just like three years ago...?

"No... I don't want that," I choked out, forcing my body still. Kurogiri, the silent observer, offered a single, knowing nod.

"Indeed, you did well to stop yourself. Killing me then would have been the end. In the past, you killed SHIKI, who possessed murderous impulses, in order to live a normal life. Now, Shiki, you must quell your own urges. Fail, and you will lose your identity as Shiki and become an empty shell. Hm... Araya claimed you were impulsive, but that was his misunderstanding. You strike me as... timid."

Softening his tone, Kurogiri averted his gaze from me.

“Araya briefed me about you. I was originally called to this city for that purpose, after all. As I said, you and I have a connection of our own. He desired to put the two of us at odds, but it seems he fell before that could ever happen. It's truly a shame. I was somewhat interested in seeing him achieve his goal."

With that, he fell silent, ceasing movement entirely. He stood frozen, without even blinking. Neither fleeing nor fighting, it was as if he were a motionless mirror image. Knife in hand, I faced this ethereal being for what felt like an eternity.

The chapel suffocated under a heavy silence. Only my hammering heart echoed, an impossible, unending bell. Unable to attack him, nor to calm the pounding in my chest, I uttered words I didn't want to say.

"Why aren't you doing anything, Kurogiri Satsuki?"

"I have already said everything I needed to say. If there is anything more to be discussed, it can only come in the form of me answering your questions.

Disengage if you wish, and I shall do the same. Fight me, and I shall defend myself. I will only aid Ouji once, a duty which has already been fulfilled. The choice, then, is yours. I will not do anything of my own accord."

His strange answer muddled my thoughts. The mage claimed the decision was mine, implying he had no will of his own. But... that was a contradiction.

"So, you're saying you'll respond however I choose? But I didn't want to reclaim my forgotten memories."

Pressing a hand to my throbbing chest, I glared at him. The mage shook his head with a hint of sympathy.

"No, *you* sought those forgotten memories. I simply responded to that wish."

I sought them? Maybe he was right. But the only thing I longed for were the records of the lost SHIKI. The memories of three years ago when I was Ryougi Shiki. The painful, yet warm memories with my classmate. That memory of shivering in the cold rain, I didn't want it back. In fact, I'd rather…

“That's wrong, Kurogiri. I don't want to regain my memories. I probably just want to forget them completely."

Yes, that was it. The very reason Shiki had forgotten those events. SHIKI's memories became a mere record upon his demise, shattered and lost. I was sure they'd never return. But in exchange for that loss, I was here now.

"So... I never called for someone like you."

"I see, it seems I was mistaken. That certainly aligns with Shiki's wish. Then, I shall return that to you as well. That is my purpose, after all."

The mage offered a faint smile. It held no hostility, no malice, no kindness, no warmth.

Touko had spoken of the lack of good or evil in the tricks of fairies. They acted without seeking results, devoid of individual will. This memory collector, he was like one himself.

But... Why the smile then? If he didn't do anything of his own accord, shouldn't his expression be unchanging?

"Something feels off. If you can only respond to wishes, why are you smiling? I certainly didn't ask that of you. As a mirror, you shouldn't be able to smile on your own."

"Yes, that's true. But I'm not smiling. As I mentioned, I've never done so before."

The mage replied, his smile unwavering.

"It merely appears as if I do. While I believe I'm in a natural state, somehow, Kurogiri Satsuki is constantly smiling. I've never felt the sensation of the act, nor have I ever attempted it. The concept of a smile, its purpose, is beyond my comprehension. Honestly, such things elude me entirely. I have never experienced happiness, after all. In a way, we're similar, you and I. You lack a true sense of life, though time may mend that. Ryougi Shiki has a future, unlike me. I am bound to the past, the pasts of others to be precise. Just as humans take to live, I collect these pasts to exist. What happens after that, what becomes of them, rests solely on the will of their owner. I am but an observer, powerless to intervene. Truly, I do not even possess the will required to do so."

The mage spoke, a faint, awkward smile playing on his lips. "Only the past?"

"Indeed. Without a past, one lacks a self. It's a sad truth, but I possess nothing I can call my own. As long as independent thought eludes me, I can harbor no dreams or aspirations. I am no different to a book. While I possess knowledge, it is not I, the book, who utilizes it. In the conventional sense, I lack human meaning. But since I don't have the courage to, nor do I feel the need to commit suicide, I have no choice but to continue existing as Kurogiri Satsuki.

Since I have no self, there is but one way to solidify my existence: fulfilling others' wishes. Kurogiri Satsuki has no other means of expression. Morality is irrelevant here. I merely

return your wishes, remind you of forgotten times.

Perhaps it's a good thing, isn't it? I simply return the significant memories you, the rightful owners, have forgotten."

"That's ridiculous," I muttered, glaring at the mage.

There was something unsettling about his words. It felt like the meaning bypassed my brain, targeting my body instead. My first instinct was to resist his words.

"Returning forgotten memories? I couldn't care less. Shiki doesn't need events delivered by some letter. Lost memories are gone. I don't believe a single word you say."

Clutching my throbbing chest, I locked eyes with him. For the first time, the mage met my gaze directly. Our stares intertwined in a vacant, almost ritualistic farewell, a far cry from what you would call a confrontation.

"So, even *you* wish to abandon your own memories? Your logic eludes me. Why relinquish that which constitutes eternity?"

“Eternity? You equate remembering and recording forgotten memories with eternity? Don't be ridiculous. Such things are plentiful everywhere. It's not something you need to put in words."

Taking a picture or video would suffice if preserving a memory was the goal, allowing you to revisit it even after forgetting. But the mage denied that. For the first time, his expression shifted from a smile.

"That is not eternity. The external world does not guarantee permanence. Admittedly, human technology will likely create an indestructible medium in the future. However, it is that object itself, not us, that will remain unchanged. Objects only hold meaning with an observer. Even if the object itself is unchanging, as long as the observer's perception isn't, it cannot be considered eternal. Can you observe something today with the same exact mindset as yesterday? No, you can't. The observer's mind is ever-changing. The new turns old, the wondrous fades. The object itself remains unaltered, but our perception alters its value.

You see, whether the specimen is immutable or not, there's no such thing as eternity, correct? Why? It's simple. We are cut off from the external world. Understand, Shiki? Eternity is formless. An event unaffected by the observer's perception, but one that dominates the observer itself. That's the only phenomenon worthy of being called eternal, the only true record.”

"But even that record will eventually change, won't it? What seemed good back then often turns out to be bad in hindsight. Your so-called eternity is nowhere to be found."

"That's not a record, but a memory. A memory is simply a reflection of one's character, which is constantly evolving. It adapts to the external world, like a dress. You should understand. Tone of voice, personality, physical body—they're all mere costumes to facilitate self-expression."

The mage took a single step towards me.

"The observer becomes the observed. It's not about your existence, but about accepting that

you are the sum of your experiences. It's about acknowledging that a fixed personality never existed. A record is the core of your soul, unaffected even by your own thoughts. That's what persists forever. Your wounds, embraced and integrated into yourself. Then, even if the world disappears, it remains within you, until your own microcosm ceases to exist. It's that which endures forever. It's that which remains unchanged forever."

Personality was irrelevant. Only the accumulated history, a testament to oneself, remained unyielding. If the observer became the observed, then both observer and observed would be unchanging. That, the mage insisted, was eternity.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"That's what I thought. You, who readily consign memories to oblivion, wouldn't understand. In this world, only a person's record is eternal. You all believe memories come after life. The truth is, life is built upon them. There are no memories that deserve to be forgotten. Even though their personality discards them, this isn't reflective of the individual's true desires. That's why your wishes are always the recording of oblivion. I am simply returning those to you, as their reflection."

Taking another step forward, the mage regained his smile and approached me. I felt the usual faint warmth in my hand holding the knife, and it dawned on me. The throbbing in my chest, the tingling in my fingertips, the dryness in my throat, had all disappeared without me noticing. After a long conversation that felt utterly pointless, I finally understood who this person truly was. My wavering had subsided completely.

Indeed, he resembled Mikiya. But a crucial difference separated them. They were similar figures, yet their paths diverged. Having clearly grasped this distinction, I saw him clearly for the adversary he was.

"Morality is irrelevant, huh? You're not inherently evil, merely fulfilling someone's wishes."

But that was a fallacy. Good and evil were undeniable realities. Kurogiri may lack a will of his own, but he possessed the intellect to discern morality. Despite that, he treated good and evil as equals. That alone stripped his right to claim harmlessness.

"I finally understand. You're just pretending to be a mirror. You're merely pretending to be harmless. You're shifting responsibility onto others, like a child."

My words brought a gleeful sparkle to the mage's eyes.

Like some sort of clown...

"So, you intend to fight me, Shiki?"

...warped, maniacal laughter erupted.

"Very well. Then I shall also fulfill my contract with Araya. I would rather we ignored each other, though."

The mage reached for his glasses, likely intending to remove them before the fight. But my body wasn't patient enough to wait. In one swift motion, I closed the distance between us.

"You." "Cannot." "See Me."

The mage's voice echoed, resonating directly in my mind. Its truth was undeniable. In an instant, I lost sight of him, and my swung knife cleaved empty air.

"Wha..."

I scanned my surroundings. There was no one else in the chapel, only the presence of another person transmitted to my skin. Kurogiri was indeed right in front of me, yet his form remained unseen.

"...That was dangerous. I underestimated your ability to act faster than I could speak. As a result, I lost an arm. It's no wonder Araya was defeated. You possess a remarkable aptitude for killing."

The voice came from right in front of me. I suppressed my urge to attack, focusing my consciousness on my immediate vicinity. If I couldn't see him, I only needed to perceive his lines of death...

"You cannot defeat me," the voice echoed directly in my thoughts. But before it finished, his death lines materialized before my eyes. "Found you."

This time, I wouldn't let him escape. Once again, I charged towards the mage. But... I lost sight of him again.

"This Place." "Inhibits." "Sight."

The voice reverberated through the chapel, which had now plunged into complete darkness. With a single word, the world turned invisible, devoid of light.

"Hm... It appears the effect is weaker on you. Your connection to the Fount places you on the same rank as my words. But that's been accounted for. Here, even Ryougi Shiki cannot perceive death. Though, of course, I can't see anything here either."

A voice whispered near my ear. Even a quick turn and a slash of my knife would find nothing but air.

"This is futile. I already explained, you cannot defeat me. Even you, who can kill anything, cannot vanquish words."

It was a truth I'd never contemplated. Words were the one enemy beyond my reach.

"However, that doesn't grant me the power to kill you either. This is the extent of my abilities. Any closer, and you could overpower me with ease. There will be no exchange of lives. I am no warrior. My role is simply to fulfill your desires."

His words sent a tremor through me. My desire... the truth I desperately wished to bury.

"Stop it! I don't want that!" My cry echoed into the void.

"Now then, I shall retrieve your sorrow. Rest assured. Forget as you may, those memories of yours will always be recorded within you."

The voice was devoid of emotion, a monotonous drone.

I could only watch, helpless, as the mage's voice permeated my being...

Oblivion Recording/6

After ending the call, I hurriedly rushed to the high school building. It was just past one in the afternoon, and the sky was shrouded with large, gray clouds.

"Looks like it's about to start pouring any second now."

Breathing in the cold winter air, I dashed past the dark forest and into the school building. I walked through the empty hallway, arriving at the English preparation room at the end of the first floor. When I hastily threw the door open without knocking, Mr. Kurogiri was waiting for me on his chair as if he already knew I was coming beforehand.

As usual, he surveilled my entire body with a smile on his face. His left arm hung down languidly as if that part of him no longer lived. For some reason, a single glance was enough for me to realize whose handiwork it was.

"Did Shiki get you?" He nodded in response.

"I sacrificed my arm so that I could escape. By the way, you need not worry about her safety. Unlike my arm that will never regain its functionality, she should be back up in another hour or so," he said with a slight smile on his face, as the faint rays of sun shone against his back.

He showed no signs of agitation, nor did he intend on hiding anything. I took a deep breath and posed a question as though I were being led on by him.

"Were you the one who drove Tachibana Kaori to suicide?" "Yes," Kurogiri Satsuki nodded.

"Were you the one who made it so that Hayama Hideo disappeared?" "Yes," the teacher nodded.

“Were you the one who taught Misaya how to use magecraft?" "Yes," the mage nodded.

"Were you the one who gathered all our forgotten memories?" "Yes," the man nodded.

"Last question. Were you really abducted by fairies?" "Yes," he nodded as his lips curved into

a smile.

◇

"Why?"

That was all that would come out of my mouth. "Why did you do it?"

I repeated the same question. I peered through his glasses, noticing that his eyes remained as calm as ever.

"There's no point asking me. All I did was grant all of their wishes. Tachibana, Ouji, and Mr. Hayama's wishes, that is. If you want a proper answer, you would be better off asking them. After all, I cannot speak on their behalf," he said with the same smile on his face.

He wasn't trying to avoid answering the question, but rather speaking his own honest truth. When Kaori turned to him and confessed her sins, he only presented her with a method that she'd already considered. Taking her own life in order to gain salvation was an act that she herself desired. When Misaya told him she wanted to take revenge, he only presented her with a method that she'd already considered. As a mage, all he did was present a means for her to drive the students of Class 1-D to suicide.

None of the actions he took were born from a desire of his own.

“But gathering everyone's forgotten memories is a completely different case. No one here desired that from you."

"Really? What makes you say that, Kokutou?" he retorted gently. "What?"

There wasn't a single tinge of malice or hostility in his voice. This wasn't what I had planned out. I came prepared to duke it out with the mastermind of this whole string of incidents if I needed to. Despite that, I felt oddly calm, like a student who came to ask her teacher for clarification. I felt like the enemy was a mirror that reflected the hesitation remaining in my heart.

"I can say for certain that I didn't wish for it."

"Of course. How could you think of something you didn't even remember in the first place? That is my reason, Kokutou," he remarked to no one in particular.

No one would be able to think of something they didn't even remember. To him, that was reason enough to gather our forgotten memories.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's simple, really. That was the only way for me to understand you, and everyone else. I can only comprehend others by tracing their records. That is why Kurogiri Satsuki sought out the memories lost to oblivion," he said in a pose of contemplation, as if he were talking about an event in the distant past.

I looked straight at his empty eyes. I wasn't here just so he could respond to me with more riddles.

"I'm looking for a more concrete answer. Why did you begin to collect the memories of others? Wasn't it your own past that you sought to recover?"

Mikiya's report came back to mind. Mr. Kurogiri was abducted by fairies when he was ten years old.

"Oh?" I heard him mutter softly.

“I certainly was not expecting that. I see you've been hard at work, Kokutou. I did in fact have an encounter with fairies in my youth. As you already know, that left me unable to store any memories of my own. It was because modern medicine could do nothing for me that I first took up magecraft. It was just as you said. I became a mage in order to recover my forgotten past, eventually deriving the means to recover forgotten memories from oblivion. In the first place, I had no right to ever interfere in the memories of others," he said in a tone of regret.

If that were the case, then… "Then why did you do it?"

"Because it was my only choice. No matter how high I climbed, I could not retrieve my own memories. The brain never truly forgets memories. However, that is only the case when the brain is free from disorder. My memories had not been temporarily forgotten, but permanently damaged. If I could not rely on my own memories, then I had only one option left to me. I would have to view the records of the past stored within the world itself. Fortunately for me, I possessed the means to do so.

Still, no matter how much I tried, it didn't work. Just as a single man cannot shake his own hand, an observer cannot select themselves as their own target. That is why I had no option left but to recover myself from within others. The consciousness and memories of man are all tied to something that exists on a deeper level. As an aspiring mage yourself, you must already know of the location we refer to as the Fount of Origin. I searched for memories that may have been connected to me from deep within the consciousnesses of others."

"You mean the Akashic Records?"

I shook my head in disbelief. That was impossible. Even Ms. Touko had declared that reaching the origin of everything was inconceivable. Yet here stood Mr. Kurogiri, someone who had. Ms. Touko once told me that while we all have our own wills, something else exists deep within the massive accumulation, known as the Will of the Primates. If someone possessed the capability to observe such a thing, they would be able to blend into the independent memories and consciousnesses of others.

What a sick twist of fate. Even if he had such abilities, he didn't find what he was looking for no matter how far he searched.

"But you still couldn't find your own memories?"

My voice faltered as I tried to speak of the end of his quest.

However, he only shook his head with the same gentle smile strewn across his face.

"No, I did find an answer. Comical, don't you think? I hadn't even lost my memories in the first place, you see. I simply failed to realize that all along. By the time that became clear to me, I'd already collected the pasts of many other people. Tell me, Kokutou. Why do you think people forget?"

I was taken aback by his sudden question. The reason why people forget. That was...

"Because our brains can only store so much information. That's why information we take in gets sorted between necessary and unnecessary.

The older you get, the more you end up forgetting. We wouldn't be able to live without confusion if we didn't have the ability to get rid of unnecessary memories."

"Correct, for the most part, at least. However, that is merely what we call sorting. It is not the forgetting that I ask about. There is a difference between memories that fade with time, and memories that are willfully forgotten. In this case, I am asking about the deliberate erasure of memories. You chose to remain silent even though you understood what I really meant, didn't you?" he asked with a soft and kind smile that seemed to blend into the sunlight.

I could only stand there in silence. It was just as he said. All I did was play the part of the honor student and give him an answer everyone knew.

“Forgetting is a defense mechanism we employ in order to protect ourselves. Is that good enough for you?"

He silently nodded in response to my hesitant answer.

I already understood from the start. We don't choose to willingly forget because our memories are unnecessary. We do it because remembering those memories can be more dangerous than forgetting. For example, the sins committed in one's past. Because possessing such memories could threaten one to destroy themselves, people choose to forget them. By doing so, people could maintain a blissful fantasy that their hands had not been stained.

"Indeed, that is the truth behind memories lost to oblivion. Sins, taboos, and regrets. You all choose to erase your own mistakes. They nestle themselves deep within the unconscious, forming an irreplaceable part of the self. What other choice is there but to forget? Do you understand? Searching the depths of a person's consciousness means retrieving records that have been lost to oblivion. I repeated that process over and over again. I peered into oblivion far too many times in search of my own memories, my confusion growing each time. Most people live in willful ignorance of their own sins. They turn their eyes away from their own filth, their own hideousness. There's nothing wrong with that. If anything, it's one of our greatest capabilities as a species.

It's just that... I grew afraid. I couldn't just turn a blind eye to all the corruption I'd seen. The world of man is constantly threatened by conflict. I had to take action, or else there would be nothing in this world that could remain for eternity. So that it all wouldn't disappear, I granted the wishes of those around me. Let's say I returned an object that was once lost to its owner. It'd be up to them to decide what to do with it, no? There would be no room for my own desires to interfere. In the same way, only the person in question could truly decide whether my actions could be condemned as evil," he said with a faint smile on his face.

He began collecting the memories of others in the search of his own past. However, by glimpsing oblivion, he grew disillusioned with the filth of mankind, feeling the need to wash it all away. His journey to trace his own experiences eventually became one of giving

form to the histories of others. He did not choose to take part in the cleansing himself, instead leaving it all up to the people who possessed a part of that filth within them. That was why he believed his actions couldn't be condemned as evil. To me, it seemed like he was just running away from the consequences of his actions.

"Do you really think so? You knew you'd be exposing their sins when you showed them their memories, and yet you say you can't be condemned?"

He nodded.

"I have no desire of my own. All I need is a means to settle it all," he said as though it were only natural.

For the first time, I felt disgusted at the man standing before me. There were several memories that I chose to forget of my own volition. Still, most of them weren't things that I buried deep within because I wanted to. There were memories that I didn't have to remember. For example, the vague illusions of misconception I saw in the past.

I once believed that cumulonimbus clouds were some sort of special creature, and that the smoke from a factory's chimney created the sky. When I walked toward the sunset, I was scared that I'd end up in some foreign country.

Regardless, my heart always pounded with excitement as I longed to see what lay beyond the horizon. Looking back at it, those were all just stupid misunderstandings of mine. Still, they were precious things that shouldn't be remembered even after they'd been forgotten. There were dreams we once harbored in the past that mustn't be remembered by our grown-up selves.

Exposing those dreams was something that shouldn't be allowed. That much I was certain of.

"All you're doing is meddling in other people's affairs. You say you gather memories in order to understand people, but you should've started with your own forgotten past first, Mr. Kurogiri."

I locked my gaze with his in resolution. Remaining unfazed, he simply smiled at me.

“No matter how much I want to do that, I can't. Kurogiri Satsuki's memories were not lost to oblivion, but stolen away from him by the fairies. I haven't forgotten them, it's just that I can't recognize my own memories."

"You can't recognize your own memories?" I parroted after him, furrowing my brow in confusion.

I didn't have the slightest clue what he meant when he said he was unable to recognize his own memories. I promptly remembered something odd in the way he talked. Whenever he referred to himself, he always made it sound like he was talking about someone else. I had no idea what caused it, but it meant that...

"Your memories were still intact even after the fairies abducted you?" He nodded.

"Correct. Kurogiri Satsuki never lost himself. That's why there was no need for me to ever gather the memories of others. No matter how many times I did it, I no longer had a home to return to," he muttered, his expression finally changing ever so slightly.

HIs smile had morphed into a humorous shape, like that of a clown in a circus.

“It’s true that I was abducted by fairies in my youth. Then again, I don’t know if those creatures really *were* fairies. Perhaps they were only spirits that sought out companionship. They told me they wanted to be together for all of eternity. I, on the other hand, only ever wanted to go home. I'd known of the superstition that children who ran into fairies could never return home, so I frantically tried to escape from them. I ran through the plains and past the woods. When I finally saw my house in sight, I looked back in relief. It was then that I noticed the countless empty husks that were once fairies, and realized that my hands were stained in their red blood. It was at that moment that I realized that the superstitions were true. After being abducted by them, I was never able to return to my home," he said with the comical expression of a clown.

I tried to envision it in my mind. Even when he returned home, all his parents were met with was their son soaked in blood. At that point, his home was no longer what it once was, it was no longer a place for him to return to. The home he'd envisioned was one with a loving family, not one with the cold stares of his parents.

"You mean the fairies didn't abduct you?”

"Indeed. Apparently, I'd massacred them all instead. That proved to be a grievous mistake, however. In the end, they cursed Kurogiri Satsuki for what he did to them. Like I said, I hadn't actually forgotten anything. It was just that from that day on, Kurogiri Satsuki became unable to recognize his memories as his own. Since then, I've been unable to authenticate anything I see with my own eyes.

All the knowledge I gained from then on was mere information, not memory. I no longer saw the world as a picture, but as a mass of information that could be changed with words. My world stopped moving when I was ten years old. There exists no method for me to dispel the curse that has been cast on me by the fairies."

He chuckled like a child.

"You mean your memories are just a form of language to you?" I mumbled, unable to hold myself back.

I'd been under the assumption that his mind was still under the possession of the fairies. I was terribly mistaken about everything else, but my hunch that his mind hadn't matured ever since he was ten years old was right. Still, that was of no consequence compared to everything else. The words he just spoke made no sense whatsoever. He said he couldn't authenticate his own experiences.

If that were true, then he wouldn't have been able to function normally. Being unable to authenticate anything you saw with your own eyes was equivalent to not having a past. No matter how good your recollection may be, without the ability to recognize an experience as your own memory, it would be no different from information written in a book. I met with Mr. Kurogiri yesterday. Because of that memory, I was able to authenticate the fact that he was someone I saw yesterday when I met him today. Lacking that capability meant that his memories would never line up. In other words, he wouldn't be able to remember anything that happened the day before.

Everything that happened to him was a first, no matter how many times he may have experienced it in the past.

"That's impossible. You recognized me as Kokutou Azaka. You wouldn't be able to tell who I am if you couldn't authenticate your memories."

I opened my eyes wide, and glanced straight at the incomprehensible foe in front of me. Meanwhile, he simply listened to me calmly.

"Is it, though? I have the traits of the person known as Kokutou Azaka recorded within me as words. Your appearance matched up with the words I used to describe Kokutou Azaka, which is why I recognized you. If someone else who fit my definition better than you arrived, then they would become Kokutou Azaka to me instead. It has nothing to do with whoever you actually are. As I said, there are no pictures within me. Everything within me is documented by means of language. In the case of humans, that'd be their height, weight, bone structure, skin color, hairstyle, behavior, and age.

I didn't look at you and recognize you as someone I know, it's just that your traits happened to match up with those of Kokutou Azaka best. I can encode, record, and store memories. Only the authentication portion of the process is impossible for me. Of course, this method of mine leads to countless mistakes. Without the ability to verify information with images, I can only distinguish them through words. The mere act of choosing to tie your hair a different way could be enough for me to mistake you. That's why I'm often considered to be forgetful by the people around me. The people of this academy have been saying that about me too, haven't they?"

His self-deprecating smile finally disappeared. As I watched him, I realized I was calming down. He wasn't looking at anyone. He never was. I finally understood. I understood why he was so alike Mikiya, and why he was fundamentally different.

The events of the day before were stored within him as records, and not as memories. Because of that, a walking mass of data such as him had no concept of self. It was impossible for someone who couldn't recognize his own memories. To him, memories didn't exist as a foundation for his sense of self, but rather as a source of information in order to survive the world around him. The will of the man known as Kurogiri Satsuki was a very faint thing. Because of that, he only ever spoke if he was talked to first, and accepted all things without any resistance whatsoever. In the first place, he couldn't resist, even if he wanted to.

That one aspect made him and Mikiya terribly similar, and yet intrinsically different. All he could ever do was accept everything. Unlike Mikiya, he had nothing he could offer in return. He was no different from a newborn baby. That was why he couldn't even tell if he was smiling or not. Not only did he not possess any thoughts of his own, he also lacked the ability to even do so.

He couldn't think for himself because he couldn't remember anything. The only way for

him to understand others was to gather their memories. What a pitiful man. He was a machine whose only function was to adapt to the events surrounding him. In order to give our vague reality a definite form, one needed to possess a will of their own.

"So you've been living in this uncertain reality for all this time?" I asked as I looked at him in pity. He nodded.

"Indeed. However, this is enough for me. I can't even realize that I'm smiling. I can only hypothesize that this appendage is my arm because I can move it as I wish and it has five fingers attached to it. Even my own body is but a reality that can be converted into words.

That's fine with me, though. We humans don't need physical bodies, do we? Everything we need is stored in our brain. The world we perceive is shaped by electrical signals within our brain. The outside world is always in a vague state of disorder, and the brain is responsible for giving it definite form. Personalities and bodies are only decorations used to make it easier for us to distinguish one other.

The only things that shall remain intact are those that exist within us. Physical matter will eventually be worn down and exhausted. The natural order dictates that our planet shall fall one day. If the correct path for our world is its eventual destruction, then there is no need to prevent it. After all, the true world, the only one that matters, exists only within our brains, and yet even that has been tainted by filth. That is why I must continue to seek the oblivion within others.

We humans are born in order to find solutions to problems. I do not possess a sense of self. Even without one, I still continue to exist in this world. Neither a definite reality or a physical body are of any importance to me. Our spirit does not dwell within our bodies. Reality possesses no meaning of its own. Eternity is nowhere to be found. It will never be found, not while the outside world is as corrupted as it is now," he remarked bluntly, with a look of total indifference on his face.

For a split second, I felt like I finally saw some semblance of his own will. However, it truly only was for a split second. Before my eyes lay no man. There was only a book that dedicated its existence to gathering the memories of people, and nothing else. He once learned magecraft and searched the recollections of others in order to regain his memories.

Still, it was all meaningless. In the end, there was no point in regaining his memories if he couldn't recognize them as his own. He realized it was a complete waste of time and changed his objective. As he looked into the minds of people, he began to see the various forms of darkness that lurked within them.

I couldn't begin to imagine the fear that a child who stopped aging at the age of ten would've felt. He couldn't bring himself to condone the filth that tainted mankind. He couldn't bring himself to condone the filth that tainted the world around him. It terrified him to no end. He was compelled to get rid of it himself, yet he was incapable of thought.

"That's why you kept searching even after you realised you'd never regain your memories. Because that's the only thing you can do."

"Yes," the Book of the False God nodded.

"A certain mage theorised that the extinction of mankind would be the solution, but I sought a solution that allowed eternity and man to coexist. Unfortunately, my thoughts are too scattered to be given any definite form. No matter how hard I try, all the noise in my head prevents me from even knowing where to start. I was searching for a way to bring peace to the world all this time. But in the end, Kurogiri Satsuki would never be able to attain it. Without a sense of self, he could only speak of pre-established truths.

Thus, I sought the answer from deep within the memories of others. The history of mankind has spanned thousands of years. It would only be natural if at least one person discovered the answer within our millenia of existence. Of course, I cannot say whether it would lie in the past or in the future. My incapability of thought has robbed me of any future. Thus, my journey has been limited to peering into the past. I must continue gathering memories in order to find a suitable conclusion."

We humans had already forgotten. We had forgotten that somewhere in this world lies a universal answer. That was the only objective he would ever hold, as well as the reason why he believed we were imperfect beings.

He had but a single thread of hope that drove him all this time. No matter how slight the possibility, there was always a chance that the answer he sought for so long lied buried within the depths of the oblivion unseen to all but him. In the end, I had no means of finding out where that answer he desired was, or whether it even truly existed in the first place.

"There's just one more thing I don't understand."

"Go ahead," he replied with his unwavering smile.

"All you needed to do was collect lost memories. Why did you feel the need to record them and grant the wishes of others?"

He silently nodded in understanding.

"It's simple. I only did it because I wanted to remain human. I wanted to feel like I was still human. If I could have the same self-centeredness as a human, and if I were capable of holding humans dear, then I thought I could become more like everyone else. That alone wouldn't be enough, though.

One cannot call themselves human if they lack a will of their own. I needed to prove that I possessed one too. I'd dedicated my life to seeking the pasts of others. I did that, and only that throughout the years without end. It is the only thing I have that I can proudly call a will of my own. Even after Kurogiri Satsuki gave up on recovering his memories, he couldn't bring himself to throw it away. Because it's the only thing that makes me human. My sole form of recreation, if you will."

"The pursuit of your goal is your objective in and of itself." He expressed his satisfaction as I took a deep breath.

"Precisely. But remember this, Kokutou Azaka. This is just how we mages are. All of us. Those were the words you wanted to hear," the mage who granted the wishes of others nodded.

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Thus did our long yet meaningless dialogue finally come to an end.

I decided to ask him one last question before I left. There was one last thing I needed to know, but not because I was tasked with solving this case. As an individual known as Kokutou Azaka, I felt the need to make things clear.

"I have one last question. What is Ouji Misaya to you?"

I no longer had any interest in him, but I couldn't leave before I heard his answer. I had a faint hope that perhaps his answer would be enough for me to consider him as a fellow human. However, I was only met with the response I expected.

"Ouji is Ouji, of course. Is there something wrong with that?" he said with a gentle smile.

That was all he felt towards Misaya, who cherished him not as a mage who existed to grant wishes, but as a human being.

"She's in love with you."

"Indeed she is. However, that is nothing more than a mere fantasy of hers." "Do you not have any love for her?"

"That is for her to decide."

It was a simple answer devoid of any humanity, one that came from a man who could only ever accept everything.

"That's all there is to your will?"

"Correct. She is no different from the other students. Then again, I cannot deny that she is more beautiful than anyone else in this school," he said in a calm voice, as though he were simply reading through a file. I took a step back in disbelief.

"No... don't tell me..."

"Yes. It was not only the memories of Class D that I gathered. No student within the academy has escaped my grasp. It is not only Class D who is responsible for contaminating Reien. You have simply not been granted the chance to see it for yourself, Kokutou."

Every student in Reien had their memories collected by him. If he'd exposed the sins of close to eight hundred people, then he'd also have granted an equivalent number of wishes. He was walking on a thin rope between life and death. With that many victims, there was a possibility some of them would harbor similar desires towards him as Misaya did, but it also meant he could end up as the object of ire to others. No, if he'd been repeating the same thing over and over again all this time, then there was certainly someone out there who resented him enough to desire his death.

So...

"You need not speak the rest, Kokutou. Your apprehensions are of no use to me. If someone's wish leads to them taking my life, then I will not be condemned for such an act. No matter what their desire, and no matter what the result, the weight of the sin will rest solely on the student. Yes, none of it shall be mine to bear."

He was willing to even accept the end of his own life. But those weren't the words of someone who was prepared for death. They were the words of someone who couldn't even feel his existence, of someone who was incapable of valuing himself.

"I misunderstood you all along."

I once thought that Mr. Kurogiri was a man incapable of hurting other people. I turned out to be terribly mistaken. In truth, he was something much lesser than that. Why did it take me so long to realize that he was no more than a man whose existence held no value whatsoever?

"You're nothing like Mikiya." He nodded in satisfaction.

I decided to leave the preparation room. I had nothing else to do, and nothing left to say to him.

"That was quite the long interrogation. I believe this is the most someone has ever made me answer."

"Let me make one thing clear. I did none of this out of my own desire. I only came here because I was tasked to investigate this incident by my master, and because it is my duty to try and understand you in Misaya's stead," I replied as coldly as I could.

He chuckled slightly in response, his mouth forming a smile of genuine glee.

It was an awkward and forced smile, different from any other I'd seen from him before.

"Ouji is in the old school building. I take it she hastily moved her plans along because you and Ryougi kept getting in her way. She's gathered the students of Class D there in order to burn them all. You ought to hurry if you intend on stopping her."

I immediately dashed out of the room. It took me until much later to realize that those words, and those words alone were the only ones that stemmed from a will of his own.

/6

Rain had begun to fall. Shrouded in the dim embrace of the surrounding forest, the old school building stood silently, its rhythmic pitter-patter against the windows the sole witness to its existence.

My objective, the girls, had gathered in a fourth-floor classroom and fallen into deep slumber. I would refrain from direct intervention. My plan was to bide my time for one of them to ignite the flames themselves. Here, within the aged halls, I waited for the rain to wane.

Gazing out at the inky forest from the second-floor corridor, I spotted a student named Kokutou Azaka approaching. With a sigh of resignation, I prepared to greet her.

◇

A light drizzle soaked her black uniform. The winter rain was as cold as snow. White puffs of breath escaped her lips as her nape prickled with the cold.

Sprinting through the biting air, Azaka reached the abandoned schoolhouse, entering through the entrance.

The deserted building exuded a profound loneliness, as if untouched for decades. Gone were the vibrant echoes of children's laughter, the very lifeblood of a breathing school. Now, only the relentless chirp of irritating insects and the acrid tang of dryness filled the air.

Azaka sniffed, recognising the unmistakable scent of gasoline. She was unusually sensitive to the smell of gunpowder and fuel.

"Oh, dear. What a pain," she sighed, slumping her shoulders. "Risking my life for someone

I've only talked to once—what was I thinking?"

As she navigated the corridor, Azaka donned a brown leather glove on her right hand. It was a prized possession gifted by her master. Crafted from salamander hide, it held back her combustion ability, yet allowed her to detonate at will.

With her combat preparations complete, she stopped before the stairs leading to the second floor. There, on the landing, stood Ouji Misaya waiting.

"You really never learn, Kokutou," Misaya chided in a refined, elegant tone, as if addressing a beloved junior.

From the landing above, she looked down at Azaka in the corridor. Countless buzzing sounds filled the air, a sight invisible to Azaka—the fairies, their wings whirring in anticipation of their queen's command to attack their prey. In addition to the overwhelming disparity in battle strength, Azaka's position was undeniably disadvantageous. The distance between them, Misaya on the stairs and Azaka below, was vast.

Ignoring this, Azaka called out, "Ouji Misaya, you liar. Didn't you say the students of Class D had to commit suicide?"

"Of course. They gathered here willingly, and their decision to immolate themselves hasn't changed. Ideally, I'd have had them repent individually, but the timeline had to be adjusted. Only half of them currently wish to die, but all will eventually succumb. Their demise by fire won't significantly alter the outcome."

Azaka shrugged. "Hm... I didn't sense any real desire for suicide. But I suppose creating a situation ripe for death and an atmosphere that condones it might push some to drag their classmates down with them. A horrendous ordeal indeed."

Her lack of tension made Misaya frown in suspicion. "Kokutou, didn't you come to save them?"

“Absolutely not. I still can't believe in God, so concepts like sin and punishment are beyond me. They seek their end, do they not? Interfering would just be meddling, wouldn't it?"

Grinning innocently like a naive young lady, Azaka looked up at Misaya. There was no pretense; Azaka was truly unconcerned.

Misaya's expression hardened. *Then... why was she here?* "Revenge, perhaps?"

"Close," Azaka replied, her gaze fixed on Misaya. "I came because you’re utterly pathetic."

The stairs, elementary-school sized, presented no challenge. A well-timed dash would bring her to Misaya within two seconds.

"Pathetic?"

Misaya's eyes blazed with fiery hostility. The threat of unleashed fairies hung heavy in the air, yet Azaka stood her ground, unflinching.

"Ouji Misaya, why did you consult Mr. Kurogiri?" Her answer was immediate: "He's my brother."

"Is that so? Then, who did you get your power from?" Another swift reply: "From my brother, too."

"Then... when did you recognise him as such?"

She started to say "from the beginning," when she realized the trivial inconsistency in her statements. Why hadn't she noticed it before?

"..."

A defeated sigh escaped her lips. The order didn't make sense.

“Exactly, Ouji. You didn't consult him because he was family. You went to him as your homeroom teacher. And even then, it likely wasn't about Tachibana Kaori. You're the most powerful person in this school. You could have interrogated Hayama directly. As a result, he’s now dead. A tragic accident for someone as brilliant as you, I'm sure. But dead nonetheless. That's why you went to Mr. Kurogiri, wasn't it?"

Misaya offered no response. She simply stared into empty space, as if seeing the shadows of nonexistent figures. Lost in her own thoughts, she seemed oblivious to Azaka's scrutiny.

Brother, brother... when had he become that to her? It couldn't have been from the start. She had no memory of his face. Then there was only one possibility. After unlocking the power of the fairies, she'd stolen Kurogiri’s memories.

Perhaps, like a hypnotic suggestion, those fragments had contained the notion that he was her brother. After all, what other explanation could there be?

"I... I..."

"You didn't know, did you? You didn't recognise Mr. Kurogiri as your brother through your own memories. It was his stolen past that shaped your perception. But another's memories are just that—theirs. Not a single ounce of your own truth exists in them. You were merely staring into a mirror. Kurogiri did nothing for you. In his eyes, you were no different from the very fairies you command. You thought you were the one in control, but you were just one of the fairies being manipulated all along..."

With that, Azaka remembered something Shiki said before. She had muttered that Misaya had forgotten too. Perhaps she had seen through the case from the very beginning.

"No... way..." Misaya choked, a strangled gasp escaping her lips. "That's a lie!"

In a burst of fury, the fairies morphed into deadly projectiles. Their buzzing wings sliced through the air like razor blades, a violent storm of machine-gun fire aimed right at Azaka.

Undeterred, she was already a blur of motion. Fists clenched, she charged up the stairs, her body in a low crouch. Sliding her body, she deftly evaded the hail of fairy fire. If the fairies were bullets aimed at a target, then she was a predator, a carnivore out to hunt its prey.

Three steps. She reached the top and stopped before Misaya, her posture unchanged. A stomp, followed by a breath exhaled like a whistle. The scooping blow drew an arc across Misaya's abdomen and plunged into her back. A muffled thump echoed in the emptiness.

"AzoLto!"

After confirming the impact of her fist, Azaka uttered a single word. The incantation to

activate one's magecraft varies from person to person. This extreme abbreviation of the chant necessary to do so served as her very own.

The air flared up in an instant. Screams of anguish erupted from the unseen things behind Misaya as flames erupted. Like gasoline poured on wooden dolls and set on fire, the inferno took the form of writhing shapes, before disappearing shortly after.

"Phew," the incendiary sniper exhaled.

"That is the true nature of what you've learnt. Magecraft isn't a coat you wear, it's a brand etched onto your very soul. Months of study wouldn't have granted you this control. Mr. Kurogiri bypassed that hurdle by imbuing you with fairies."

Azaka's gloved hand, still smoking, clenched into a fist. Misaya crumpled to her knees, eyes vacant like a possession had been lifted.

"So... that's it," she rasped, a humorless laugh escaping her lips. A bitter acknowledgement of her own blindness.

...

The girl recalled... that time.

When she confronted Hayama, their argument eventually led to him resorting to violence. Having never been defied before, she pushed him back in a daze. It was only a simple push, but that was enough for him to meet an unfortunate death.

"I don't know what to do anymore," she said, pleading for help from Kurogiri Satsuki.

She couldn't bring herself to consult her father or the principal. She confessed her sin only to Mr. Kurogiri, the teacher she had always been attracted to. He was a strange man. Used to people obsessed with glory and results, she thought Mr. Kurogiri, who was obsessed with nothing, was a special person.

That's why... she dreamed that he would help her. And as she hoped, he solved everything.

Her brother, whom she had an idealized illusion of. Satsuki solidified that into reality. The girl, who wanted to avenge Kaori's death. Satsuki taught her the power to make that possible.

He told her that she must not tarnish her beauty with their filth. Why didn't she realize it then? He wasn't talking about her and the girls.

To remain untainted, he explained, one must utilize tools other than oneself.

At that time, she actually knew. Even if she didn't kill them herself, as long as she wished for their death, in the end, regardless of the process... *the same thing would have happened, wouldn't it, Mr. Kurogiri?*

If only I, Misaya, had told him back then.

...

“I wish I hadn't said anything," Misaya muttered, her gaze fixed on the empty expanse above.

She didn't even acknowledge my presence as I stood by her side. Yet, her words were meant for herself as well as for me.

"I knew," she confessed. “Satsuki was simply being himself. I, who loved him for who he was, shouldn't have forced my fantasy upon him. But the thought of him not being mine was unbearable. I didn't want him to belong to anyone. But that, in turn, meant I didn't want him to belong to me either. I should have just... watched over him. Even unrequited, that would have sufficed."

Her voice trailed off as if recalling a distant memory.

...We're so alike, Ouji. I hate to admit it, but you and I share the same burden. The moment we confess our deepest feelings for those we cherish even more than ourselves, they somehow diminish in importance. We both know this truth all too well. My—our hearts are filled with a love that can never be reciprocated.

"And yet... I couldn't help but crave for it," she murmured, as if confessing the heaviest of sins.

The words tumbled from my lips before I could contain them.

"Ouji, Mr. Kurogiri was the one who pushed Tachibana Kaori to take her own life. To him, nothing special exists. Your revenge was pointless from the start."

"You truly are a fool, Kokutou. I already knew that."

She pressed her face against the floor as if in repentance, a chuckle resounding. Her faint laughter sounded like tears.

◇

Leaving her and the children behind, I departed from the school building. The falling rain would eventually turn into fog, as if veiling the path back.

Oblivion Recording/7

◇

I dreamt of my childhood days. It was a distant memory of a brightly lit night, from back when I still lived with the Kokutou family.

A few hours earlier, the old man who lived beside us passed away. He was just a neighbor, but he'd spent his days in solitude ever since he lost his family at a young age. Even though he'd already gone senile and constantly forgot what we'd talked about the day before, he was always kind and welcoming.

Mikiya spent his days bonding with the old man, while I watched from afar. The old man spoke to him in order to bury his loneliness, while Mikiya had simply grown fond of him.

One day at the dinner table, our parents suddenly told us that he fell to the floor and never got up again. Everyone at the table fell silent, while I also failed to stop myself from shedding tears. He'd spent decades coping with the loneliness after he lost his family, but in the end he was only rewarded with a solitary death. Even someone who was as coldhearted as I was could recognize how sad it all was.

Since I couldn't hold back my tears, I was certain that Mikiya was crying too. However, for some reason, he didn't cry. He had a look of sorrow on his face, but I didn't see any tears. I could tell from the pain in his eyes that he wasn't forcing himself. I didn't understand. Why wouldn't someone who looked so sad just cry? In the end, he didn't end up shedding a single tear.

A few days later, I found out that it was Mikiya who first discovered his corpse when he went to go play with the old man.

On a brightly lit night, I stood at the veranda as I gazed upon the stars. I went there because I knew that Mikiya had come before me.

"Why aren't you crying?"

"I don't really know why either."

He looked at me with a difficult look on his face. His eyes were filled with a heavy sorrow, and a deep kindness.

"Is it because boys shouldn't cry?" I asked him, remembering what my father had once told me.

Still, he only shook his head in response. "Hey, tell me why."

"Even though I want to, I can't. The act of shedding tears is a very special thing, you see," he said as he looked at the night sky.

He looked like he was on the verge of tears, and yet not a single one fell from his eyes.

At that time, I finally understood. Even though he'd felt the pain of others so strongly, and even though he always seemed like he was about to burst into tears, he'd never cry.

He was right. The act of shedding tears cast a shadow of grief around everyone, contaminating them with sorrow.

Indeed, it was a very special thing. A single tear was enough to change so much. That was why he would never cry. Someone as ordinary as him, possessing an Origin that wouldn't let him hurt others, would never be able to cry, no matter how sad he was. That was because if he did, he would end up becoming a special existence to someone.

In exchange for being able to understand everyone, he gained an empty solitude that would never be comprehended by anyone.

It was at that moment, that Kokutou Mikiya became someone I could never lose, someone that was much more important to me than my own self.

On a brightly lit night, my brother and I gazed upon the stars. That memory was what shaped me in the years to come. It was a dream of a distant memory that should've been left forgotten all along.

◇

January 11, Monday. With winter break coming to a close, I was back to being a regular student. After my last class, I returned to the dorm to freshen up, then went to ask one of the Sisters for permission to leave. She gave me the okay with a disgruntled look on her face, then I ran into Fujino as I was about to leave.

"Are you leaving, Azaka?"

"I'll be gone for quite a while. I might not make it back in time for curfew, so please give Seo the heads-up for me."

After entrusting a message for my roommate to my classmate with beautiful, long black hair, I hurriedly left the dorm. I briskly walked through the forest, arriving at the school gate. Asking the guard to open up the smaller gate for me, I was soon met with a familiar

sight as I left the school grounds.

He was dressed in black from head-to-toe, with a light brown coat on top of his clothes. He seemed to have been waiting for quite a while, seeing as the tip of his nose where his glasses rested on had gotten red.

I ran towards him and steadied my breath, making sure to talk to him as calmly as possible.

"Did I keep you waiting long?"

“Uh, I'm not too sure. I don't feel like it was that long, though," he said, with a difficult face on his face that made it hard to distinguish whether he was smiling or discontent.

"Shall we get going? We only have two hours until curfew."

We began walking. I stood beside him, making sure to keep my emotions in check. We walked along the tall walls of Reien, headed towards the station.

It all began with a call from Mikiya the day before. He said he wanted to make up for the fact that he'd left me alone on New Year's.

"It's a bit late, but do you want a New Year's gift?" he asked. I promptly decided to forgive him for ditching me.

Once again, I couldn't believe how easily I folded, but perhaps there wasn't anything wrong with that. I'd spent the whole night wondering what I should ask him to buy for my first ever gift, but I hadn't come to a conclusion yet. I was still racking my brain as we walked side-by-side.

"So what do you want to eat?"

I expressed my confusion at his sudden question.

"I'm talking about dinner. Do you want Japanese or Western food? I told you it was my treat, didn't I?"

"What?" I exclaimed, craning my head in puzzlement.

It didn't make any sense whatsoever. I hadn't heard anything about this when we talked the day before.

"Why are you acting so confused? You said you couldn't decide when I asked you what you wanted yesterday, so we settled on a meal, didn't we?"

I looked up at Mikiya dumbfoundedly. I said that I hadn't made up my mind yet, to which he replied that we should go out for dinner anyway and hung up.

“Well, if you really can't decide, we can just look for a place that looks appealing. Don't worry, I brought lots of cash. No price tag is going to scare me off today," he said with a smile as he tried to reassure me.

Absolutely unbelievable. He seriously believed that taking a girl out to dinner was enough to make her happy.

"Well, that's Mikiya for you," I muttered as I breathed a sigh.

Mikiya asked me what I said, but I just decided to ignore him. It wasn't like he'd get it even if I explained it to him. After all, I fell in love with him because he was that kind of person.

Even if I tried to force my own ideals onto him, that'd only end up messing up my quest to make him fall for me.

"I won't make the same mistake as her. There's no need to rush."

I mentally repeated that to myself over and over again like a mantra.

"You've been talking to yourself a lot today, Azaka. Is something bothering you?"

I shook my head in response. There was only one slight problem that was bothering me.

"It's nothing. I was just swearing to myself that I wouldn't fail like she did."

I reassured him as I clung to his arm. That was as far as I could go within the bounds of normal sisterly love. Mikiya blushed as he walked on in his usual gait. I did as he did, until eventually the glamorous lights of the city came into our sight.

Thus did my New Year finally begin, as late as it admittedly was. In honor of that, I settled on some really fancy Japanese food.

Oblivion Recording/

After finishing his classes for the day, Kurogiri Satsuki returned to the preparation room. The weather was cloudy for the first time in a few days, and the corridor was as tranquil as a monochrome photograph.

He opened the door to the room and slowly surveyed the interior. His room was overflowing with objects, and yet did not feel lived in whatsoever. Bathed in the gray sunlight, it seemed frozen in time. After confirming that the scene matched the information in his records, he stepped inside. The door closed with a thud.

"_____"

At the same time, he felt a sharp pain and looked down.

There, a familiar student stood before him. She was holding a knife which she had plunged deep into his abdomen.

“...Who are you?" he asked softly.

The student didn't respond. She could only tremble, hand gripping the knife, unable to meet his gaze.

He analyzed her: height, weight, hair color, hairstyle, skin tone, bone structure. Records confirmed only one student matched. However...

"So it's you. You've been waiting to kill me, haven't you?"

The student didn't respond. He shrugged once and gently placed his hand on her shoulder, as if to soothe her fear.

"Then you may leave now. You have accomplished your purpose."

The student trembled at his words. Kurogiri was being kind even to the one who was trying to kill him. Perhaps that fact alone was more terrifying than the act itself, for she dropped the knife and fled even after watching her back disappear, he still couldn't understand. Who

exactly was that student? Every detail pointed to a specific student, except for the hairstyle. That single discrepancy rendered her a stranger to him. Even if that was the only thing that had changed, if there was just one point that didn't match the recorded information, then to him, that student was akin to a stranger.

He closed the door, locking it from the inside. Blood staining his path, he meticulously locked every cabinet.

Eventually, weakness overtook him, and he slumped down against the wall.

Death is nothing.

I have always accepted this outcome.

He observed his own body, now stained red with blood. A stark contrast to the Kurogiri Satsuki he'd recorded thus far. Perhaps this explained the muted terror of his impending demise, a faint reflection of the fading self he observed. He... no, I would now collect the current Kurogiri Satsuki.

The bleeding was severe. He would probably not survive. He had about ten minutes left before he expired. A ragged breath escaped him. He wanted to use his last moments freely, but ten minutes was far too short. What could he think about? What answers could be unearthed?

No, the duration was irrelevant. Born mere moments ago, he was fated to die within ten. In a way, this sliver of time was his entire existence. It was as long as he'd ever have. So, what should he contemplate? What mysteries to ponder? His past self would have used up all of his time thinking about the subject. But in this strangely lucid life, a topic surfaced with unexpected ease.

——Breaths, ragged.

——Ten minutes, long.

——Bleeding, severe.

——Life, short.

His mind, a canvas washed clean, voiced these disjointed thoughts. "That's right. Let's delve into the time before birth."

In his final moments, a revelation dawned. The ultimate oblivion? Memories before life itself. A shroud cloaked the time before birth, the only place devoid of memory's touch.

The world before their lives began. So meaningless, so peaceful. Ah, suffering. It had been such a simple thing all this time.

"Perhaps, if I had never been born, the world... I would have known such peace."

A genuine smile, a flicker of joy in the face of his demise. He couldn't explain its purpose, yet... one truth resonated. In this extended moment, he, for the first time, truly felt himself smile.

/7

...

The mage claimed that even I couldn't kill words. Yet, even words will someday perish. All things fade, vanish, and succumb to death. Without this mortality, the boundary between past and future would blur. It is because things don't return that we cherish them, fiercely guarding against their loss.

Why, then, do we deem something non-eternal because it disappears? Even forgotten, the fact that it existed will not change. Only the receiving vessel, our hearts, undergoes change.

I should have spoken. Seeking eternity in oblivion is a futile pursuit.

Things meant to be forgotten are naturally consigned to peaceful slumber, free from further distortion. This act of forgetting, itself, becomes a form of eternity.

Now I understand. SHIKI, the boy within me, had retreated into oblivion. He carefully laid those truly precious memories to rest, ensuring they wouldn't be warped by my present self.

Even if I cannot remember them, their existence remains irrefutable. The mage must have known this, but he could not accept it as an answer.

Perhaps lacking a self, he craved eternity in words, the seemingly undying entity, precisely because he possessed nothing truly his own.

——— A hollow echo. An eternity that can be put into words is worthless.

...

◇

January 7th had arrived, and I was finally free from the stifling confines of the Reien uniform. Leaving Azaka behind in the school grounds, I stepped out of the academy gates. It had taken a whole day to cancel my scheduled transfer, but with the incident resolved, the school shouldn't have any complaints.

Clad in the navy blue kimono Akitaka sent, I layered a leather jacket and strolled out of this world of forest and school buildings. There, a familiar face awaited me.

"You slacker. What are you doing here?"

"Hey, come on. I'm not always free, you know. Well, not usually. There just happened to be a gap in my schedule today," Mikiya shrugged, claiming innocence.

Feeling a sense of relief at his gesture, I shook my head, a chill running down my spine. Truth be told, I hadn't wanted to see him for a while. The fragments of memories I had regained gnawed at my growing anxiety. Even so, in that moment, my longing for his goofy expression outweighed the fear.

"Fine. Then I'll keep you company to pass the time. I heard a boring fairytale, so you get to hear it too."

I started walking.

"You really can't be honest with yourself, huh?" Mikiya playfully remarked as he peered at me.

By the time we finished talking about Kurogiri Satsuki and Ouji Misaya, we'd passed through the town we live in, even passing each other's apartments. An unspoken agreement led us towards Touko's office.

"But why was it that only the Class D incident came to light? Azaka said Kurogiri collected memories from all the students, right?" I voiced my final question.

Mikiya nodded, his brow furrowed.

"That's probably because Ouji's wish was for revenge on the Class D students. Returning forgotten memories as letters also reflected what she wanted. The other students only had their memories collected."

"Don't insult me. I know that much. But why did only *her* wish cause an incident?"

"Hmm… Perhaps Ouji was special. The others had Kurogiri give form to their wishes, but she was the sole exception. Her desire was to carry it out with her own hands. That difference, I think, is key."

I see. A realization dawned. Kurogiri, the self-proclaimed mirror, wasn't one for her, and only her.

"But why?"

Mikiya didn't answer. Silence descended as we walked in the winter chill. A long pause

followed by contemplation.

His gaze turned mournful. "Shiki, Kurogiri Satsuki... actually had a younger sister."

He left the rest unsaid. Perhaps that was enough. Whether she was his real younger sister or not, only Kurogiri knew the truth. And even he lacked the means to verify it.

The truth, forever shrouded in darkness. A cruel irony. Even here, an eternity existed.

"What a strange tale. How pitiful Kurogiri was," I muttered, genuinely sorry for him.

That mage who lacked a sense of self reminded me so much of myself just a few months ago. But to my sentimental musings, Mikiya opened his eyes in surprise.

“I'm shocked. You're siding with him after what he did to you?" "I'm not siding with him. I’m just saying I don’t resent him for it." *That's right, I didn't resent him. I couldn't. Because, well...*

"He reminded me of you, Mikiya." "Huh?"

"Your last name can be pronounced Kurogiri too, can't it? Just like him." I offered that ridiculous explanation. Mikiya chuckled beside me.

"I see. That's quite the equivoque you have there."

He must have taken my words as a joke, laughing innocently. But seriously, that was hardly witty.

"That's a dead term, Mikiya," I scoffed, rolling my eyes. "Oh," I realized something and let out a small laugh. "What's up?"

"Nothing. Just that you've killed something that I couldn't."

Mikiya tilted his head in confusion, pondering my words. That was understandable. That soliloquy must have hit him completely out of the blue.

"It's nothing. Just forget this meaningless rambling. It's obvious, really."

...Yes, in the modern age, even words can die. Words that lose their universality are stripped of their meaning, becoming mere sounds. Just like that mage, who was left behind in his childhood and forced to grow up alone.

"What's that supposed to mean? I'm not as violent as you, Shiki. I've never even punched anyone, so there's no way I'd kill someone, right? Yeah, I'm sure of it... but."

Mikiya awkwardly delved deeper into thought, spurred by his own words. Knowing him, he was likely revisiting past actions, wondering if he'd ever unintentionally caused harm. That part of him really was idiotic. But for some reason, I found myself content to simply observe him. Without dwelling on the reason, Ryougi Shiki continued walking, a gentle smile gracing her face.

As dusk fell, the stars began to twinkle in the sky.

By the time the moon hung frozen overhead, we realized we had passed Touko's office and were walking down an unfamiliar path.

A shared glance, then mutual sighs.

Mikiya chuckled, calling us out for our absentmindedness. But a secret smile tugged at my lips.

The reason, well, I knew instinctively.

This was the first night stroll I'd taken with someone else.

Oblivion Recorder (fairytale)/Fin

Boundary Formula

(0)

◇

I'm going to hit someone. Anyone will do, really, but I want it to be someone who I think deserves it. Discretion is key, though. I don't want to get into trouble at school, and I'm not used to being the centre of attention.

After a week of deliberation, I chose my target: a blonde underclassman who once glared at me. I'd strike near the arcade he frequented. Every week, fueled by the sting of defeat, he'd pick a random customer to beat up after a game. Of course, that didn't take place indoors. Sly guy that he was, he'd wait until his target stepped outside, then drag them into some dark alley to vent his rage. Since it conveniently all happened out of sight, he'd gotten away with it so far. It was the perfect opportunity for me.

◇

"I detest weak people." She rejected me without a second thought.

It's true, I'd never thrown a punch in my life. I could claim disinterest, but the truth was, I'd always lacked the courage and assertiveness to fight.

Perhaps I *was* weak.

To break free from this weakness, I needed to hit someone. It was a quick fix, a shortcut to proving my strength. Besides, I was curious. After seventeen years, there was little left I hadn't experienced.

◇

Under the cloak of twilight, I lured him to the arcade, drawing his ire with repeated victories. When I walked out the door, he glared at me and dragged me into an alleyway.

Though, unlike his previous encounters, there was no pretence of civility. His rage was palpable.

A sense of relief washed over me. While he had a long list of sins to answer for, I still felt a pang of guilt at the thought of violence.

But that evaporated entirely. If he was willing to strike first, then any retaliation would be justified. He grabbed my arm and pulled me deeper into the shadows.

"Hey," he grunted, turning on his heel.

Before he could finish, I whacked him in the head. A sickening crack followed, and he crumpled like a ragdoll. He lay sprawled on the ground, unmoving, a crimson stain blossoming on the pavement.

"...Huh?" My mind reeled.

One swing, a small piece of wood no bigger than my palm, and he was dead.

"...What the hell?"

The disbelief choked out the words from my mouth. *An accident. It had to be!* No malice, no dark desire fueled the blow. *This wasn't what I wanted. I never meant to...*

"...I didn't know."

That's right. I didn't know.

Humans were shockingly fragile, so easily broken. Yet, they dealt violence constantly. Why was *I* the one who ended a life? A single act on my part, against their habitual brutality, yet I was the one stained with death.

I didn't understand. Was it just my misfortune, or were they perpetually lucky? Maybe one of us was simply unlucky enough to die from the blow.

I didn't understand it. I couldn't comprehend it. Not a single bit.

I didn't understand the difference between us, the path ahead of me, or the weight that I would carry from this guilt. I was left unable to grasp what my next move should be.

Deep down, though, a sliver of clarity. *It's the police's job to arrest murderers. That's common sense. So, even if I haven't done anything wrong...*

"No, I'm not the villain here. I'm not! Arresting me would be a mistake!"

The logic was clear, I just had to conceal the murder. There were no witnesses, thankfully. If I could just get rid of the body, my life would return to its mundane rhythm.

But how? Burial was out of the question, and burning would leave an undeniable trace. Disappearing a body perfectly in this modern world was a near-impossible feat.

Damn it all. If only this were the wilderness, the animals would simply gobble it all up...

...Simply gobble it all up?

"Ah, I see! Why don't I just eat it?"

A simple solution, so brilliant it made me want to dance, had popped into my head. Devouring the body would solve everything! *But how would I do it?* No one person could consume such a mass in a single night.

So I decided to start small and at least attempt to drink the blood. I pressed my lips to the wound, tasting the viscous liquid as it flowed, clinging to my throat.

Soon, I was coughing violently. It was no use. I couldn't handle it at all. The blood clung to my throat, making it impossible to swallow. If I persisted, I would risk suffocating.

What do I do? What do I do?

I couldn't consume the meat, nor could I drink the blood. I clutched my head and gritted my teeth, a wave of trembling washing over me.

...I had killed a person.

...I couldn't even hide it.

...I had killed a person.

...My life was over.

Lost and confused, I saw no escape, when a voice suddenly cut through the silence. "Why didn't you keep drinking until the end?"

I spun around to find a tall, imposing figure shrouded in a long black coat. His brow furrowed; his expression a mask of grim contemplation.

"Bound by human morality, are we, boy?"

His gaze remained fixed on me, the corpse lying unseen.

"...Morality?" I echoed and pondered.

Why had the thought of consuming the flesh even crossed my mind? The blood I drank held no revulsion. I hadn't even flinched when I pressed my lips to the rotten, festering wound. What had happened to me?

To devour another human being–wasn't that a transgression far exceeding mere murder? Even the most depraved killers wouldn't stoop to such barbarity. They wouldn't even contemplate such a horrific act. Cannibalism, after all, was profoundly abnormal.

"My instincts... they told me to."

"Is that so? That makes you special, then. In the crucible of murder, choices are stripped bare. Most would crumble under the weight of their guilt. But you… You confronted it in a way wholly your own, even if it was a method deemed 'broken' by common sense. There is no room for judgement here."

The cloaked figure took a step closer, and rather than fear at being caught, I felt a strange sense of being chosen.

"I'm... special?"

"Indeed. You exist beyond the confines of normalcy. In the realm of the ordinary, the abnormal aren't bound by sin. Their actions, however heinous, are simply an extension of their very nature. Morality's scales have no bearing on their deeds."

He leaned closer, his hand reaching for my cheek.

Abnormal. Madman. Deviant. Lost.

These labels were meaningless. I wasn't one of those misfits.

But, if I were mad… wouldn't it somehow justify what I'd done?

"I'm… different. I'm not normal."

The man nodded silently.

"Precisely. You are not normal. You're broken, aren't you? If so…"

Go ahead. Shatter completely.

The man's voice seeped into me, a comforting warmth.

Yes, that was it. How beautiful. Accepting it transformed everything. The tremors, the paralysing fear of the future–all replaced by a surge of exhilarating euphoria. My vision swam, the world dissolving into a blinding white. My throat constricted, gasping for air that wouldn't come. The pain, an inferno raging from within, surpassed any drug I'd ever tried. This… This was a high no amount of fizzy water coursing through my veins could ever replicate.

Held captive in his iron grip, tears streamed down my face for the first time. Hot, raw teardrops, laced with a primal scream of exhilaration.

I would shatter.

◇

The boy, over the course of an hour, devoured a human corpse. Using nothing but his bare teeth and jaw, he consumed a creature larger than himself. The taste of human flesh held no pleasure or disgust; it was simply a task requiring raw exertion.

"An hour? Impressive," the cloaked figure remarked, having witnessed the boy's meal.

The boy turned, his mouth a crimson mask, not from the human flesh, but from the shattered bones of his own jaw, testament to his relentless chewing.

Yet, he hadn't stopped for a single second. As a result, the corpse had vanished without a trace.

"But that is your limit," the man continued. “Merely acknowledging your Origin won't suffice. It must be awakened to take form." The boy listened with vacant eyes. "If you remain as you are, you will simply be labelled a deranged cannibal, and your life will end tragically. But surely that's not what you desire. The power of a transcendent being, free from all constraints, the specialness of an aberrant life–don't you crave it?"

The man's voice was like a direct inscription carved into the boy's numb mind, a powerful suggestion. The boy, his throat slick with his own blood, nodded like he was praying to a deity.

"Very well. You shall be the first," the man nodded.

He raised his right hand, but before he could act, the boy rasped, "Who are you?"

The man in the black coat answered without a flicker of emotion. "A mage. Araya Souren."

The words echoed through the alleyway, heavy and oracular.

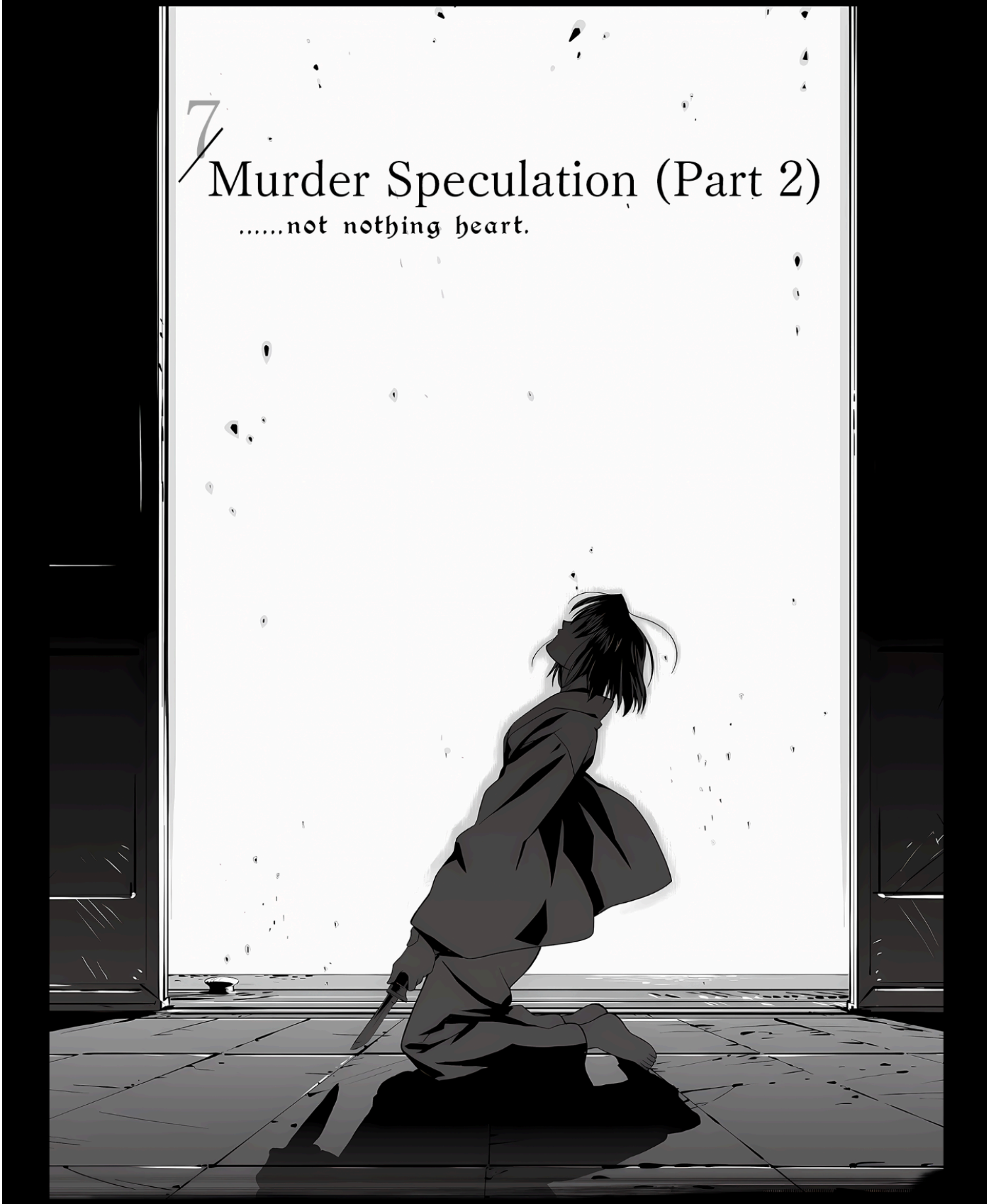
◇

The mage finally asked for the boy's name. The boy provided it.

A faint smile crept across the mage's stern face.

"Lio... What a pity. A single letter's difference, and you could have been a lion.

It was a melancholy laugh, tinged with genuine regret.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Murder Speculation (Part 2)
.....not nothing heart.

Frozen breaths, the only warmth between us.

We watched each other's hearts beat, on the verge of fading.

Soon, our precious memories would fade, leaving only lingering regrets.

Like rain, pouring down like mist after school.

Like the sunset, painting the classroom in fiery hues.

Like snow, the first white night and your black umbrella.

Simply seeing your laughter brought me such joy.

I felt safe, yet uneasy.

Simply walking beside you brought me such happiness.

We were together, yet not.

We paused for just a moment, bathed in the warm, dappled sunlight.

You smiled, assuring me we would return to this spot someday.

Those words... I had always longed to hear them from someone.

—— Those were truly dreamlike days.

/ The Boundary of Emptiness

/ Prologue

The year was 1999, February 1st. The world teetered on the cusp of the millennium, fueled by anxieties surrounding the impending new year and the pronouncements of renowned prophets.

Shiki and I, Kokutou Mikiya, traversed the unusually harsh winter city. By five o'clock in the heart of winter, the sun had dipped below the horizon, leaving the streets shrouded in darkness. Our breaths puffed out in white clouds as we navigated the path homeward, our attire stubbornly unchanging.

As usual, I wore my black jeans, a turtleneck, and a dark green coat. Shiki, on the other hand, donned a red leather jacket over her blue kimono, completing the ensemble with boots that rivalled her legs in length. I often wondered if she ever felt the cold; for four years, this had been her chosen attire, impervious to both the summer's heat and winter's chill.

Regardless of her reasons, I was on my way back from work, and she had come to see me home. But I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more to her visit.

"What's going on, Shiki? You don't usually come all the way to the office. You could've just waited for me at home."

Her response, laced with a hint of annoyance, arrived without making eye contact.

"No particular reason. Just thought I'd walk you home. Things have been rather unsafe lately."

I couldn't shake the feeling she was deliberately avoiding my gaze. The conversation stalled, leaving me speechless.

Shiki, her full name Ryougi Shiki, was a strange girl perpetually clad in a kimono. Our friendship blossomed during high school, evolving through various events into our current dynamic. Exactly a hundred and sixty centimetres tall, she possessed an androgynous appearance, which was only accentuated by her beautiful face. To top it off, she spoke with a decidedly masculine voice. Her porcelain-white skin, deep black eyes, and hair, cut carelessly around her shoulders, created an ambiguous air–a fusion of Eastern and Western styles. Her posture, rigid and unwavering, as she fixated on the darkening landscape, evoked a comparison–not to a human, but to a taut carnivore.

"Shiki," I finally managed, “you've been acting funny lately."

"Have I?" she countered, her mind seemingly elsewhere. "I don't recall doing anything to make you laugh."

Further conversation seemed pointless. We fell into a silent side-by-side walk, heading towards the bustling station from the residential area. Despite the lit streetlights, a midnight quiet hung heavy in the air.

The reason was simple: for ten straight nights, the town had been a ghost town after dark. Shiki and I were the only two brave enough to venture out.

The truth was, I knew exactly why Shiki had come all the way to the office.

The city was in the same situation as three years ago. Back when I was a mere first-year, a serial killer had stalked the streets, striking fear into the hearts of all. Flaunting a disregard for reason, they butchered innocent victims under the cloak of darkness. Six were brutally taken before the police, despite their valiant efforts, were forced to leave the case cold. The killer's reign of terror began roughly four years ago, abruptly vanishing in the following winter, just as Shiki and I were about to embark on our second year of high school. Shortly after, a car accident left Shiki in a coma.

After graduating, I pursued university for a brief period, but ultimately dropped out within a month. Finding employment with Ms. Touko, I waited patiently until last summer, when Shiki finally emerged from her coma.

For me, the serial killer incident was a chapter closed, consigned to the past. But for Shiki, it felt like a mere six months had passed. Ever since news of their return flooded the airwaves, a growing tension had gripped her. It was as if she had reverted to the unstable Shiki of three years ago, the one who claimed to be a murderer and harboured another personality named SHIKI.

Emerging into the station square, the city presented a facade of normalcy. Unlike the deserted residential streets, the bustling avenues adorned with vibrant lights seemed impervious to the threat lurking in the shadows. People huddled together, creating a lively atmosphere that defied the lurking danger. It was still early in the evening, and the throngs showed no signs of diminishing.

Halfway through their journey, a television flickering in a shop window displayed the news. Unsurprisingly, the recent killings dominated the broadcast.

Shiki stopped, her gaze fixated on the screen.

"They're calling them a bloodthirsty monster now, Mikiya," she said, a wry smile playing on her lips. Following her gaze, I saw the term 'bloodthirsty monster' superimposed over a crossed-out 'serial killer.'

"Makes sense, I suppose. With over ten victims, ‘serial killer’ doesn't quite capture the scale of it anymore. But ‘bloodthirsty monster’ seems a bit dramatic. They could just stick with ‘murderer.’ No need for such flamboyant labels," I offered, sincerity lacing my voice.

Clearly thinking my opinion was trite and predictable, Shiki's expression morphed into a mocking glance before she scoffed. "That's where you're wrong, Kokutou. Murder and slaughter are different. If this perpetrator does exist, they're nothing less than a bloodthirsty monster. And I'm sure the killer would relish that title. They don't need a

reason. Their victims are chosen by mere chance, a turn left or right. They're not truly taking lives." Staring at the television screen, her dim reflection in the glass seemed to stare back at her.

"You're saying a murderer doesn't take lives?" I asked, tilting my head in confusion.

"Murder and slaughter are different, remember, Kokutou? You can only kill one person in a lifetime."

Taking her eyes off the TV, Shiki met my gaze. Her expression was the same as always—indifferent, as if she were gazing off into the distance. But now, her dark eyes seemed to hold a hint of sadness.

"Only one person?" I echoed, perplexed.

A faint memory stirred within me, an echo of similar words uttered by Shiki in the past. But the details remained frustratingly elusive.

This lapse would later become a source of deep regret. Had I only recalled that moment, that fleeting instant, perhaps things wouldn't have unfolded as they did.

"Forget it," Shiki dismissed. "It's not important. Let's just get home. I just woke up. My routine demands that I eat some food right about now."

"You just woke up? Shiki, what about school? It's Monday, so you can't just sleep all day."

"Relax, I was there this morning. Only missed a few days since November. Impressive, right?"

My surprise was genuine. I nodded, momentarily speechless. Shiki reached for the hem of her coat.

"Alright then, reward me. Heard you took Azaka to some fancy restaurant in Akasaka. Funny thing is, that place has been on my wishlist for ages. That was the first time I felt like killing her."

With a playful threat, Shiki grabbed my hand and pulled me along. I didn't know where we were going, but I knew it would be an expensive establishment. Even so, I couldn't bring myself to resist.

"Well," I thought, a tinge of resentment towards Azaka for spilling the beans bubbling up, "might as well enjoy myself."

To be honest, the Shiki I was with now seemed to channel her old self. The one with the reckless, carefree spirit of a boy named SHIKI. Somehow, that brought me a sense of comfort, and I didn't question the dissonance. In that moment, the joy of her company outweighed all else. And so, on that February night, Shiki and I walked home together.

It was just an ordinary night, an ordinary scene. But in hindsight, it marked the last time I would truly see Ryougi Shiki.

Murder Speculation / 1

▪

April, 1995.

That was when I first met her.

▪

It had been a week since the media coined the term ‘bloodthirsty monster’ to refer to the culprit.

Akimi Daisuke, my uncle, forced himself into my—in other words—Kokutou Mikiya's apartment at five in the morning. After that, he woke me from my peaceful slumber and ordered me to cook him a French breakfast. He was now chomping down his toast while haphazardly skimming through the morning news.

The newspaper he read was dated February 8th, 1999. In the week since the media condemned the culprit, they'd been continuing their spree at a rate of one casualty a day ever since the day after the news broke.

"Geez. It's starting to seem like this freak actually enjoys being called a monster. Man, I guess we lit a fire under them or something. I wasn't expecting them to just up the pace like that," he said with an unbothered snicker.

Daisuke was a member of the First Investigation Division, but he wasn't exactly known for his ability to take his work seriously. As unconcerned as he seemed, he was anything but unrelated to the matter at hand. After all, he was working to arrest the culprit behind not one, but two cases—the current string of killings, and the serial murders from four years ago.

"Don't you have better things to do than wasting your time here, Daisuke? The victim from last night's details are printed in that newspaper, right?"

I was seated right across Daisuke as we both continued to work through our breakfast plates. Even though he had even more work piling up for him, he simply continued to mask his face with the newspaper as he let out a noncommittal reply.

"It ain't that simple, you see. The situation's changed quite a lot in the past week. If things do take a turn for the worse, then the Special Assault Team might just come out and join the fray," he grumbled as he grabbed his coffee mug, his face still obscured by the shade of the newspaper.

Well, that was pretty much the only reason he ever came to my place. I owed him for helping me out all the time, so hearing his frustrations out was the least I could do to repay him.

"You mean the counterterrorism unit? Do the bigwigs over at the police want to wage war or something?"

"It's under consideration, that's all. Everything I'm going to tell you now is off the record, got it? We've been ordered to keep this information classified from even our families."

After seeing me nod in affirmation, he began to speak. Apparently, Daisuke had never heard the story of the King with Donkey Ears.

"Listen up, Mikiya. Just like the case four years ago, we don't even have the slightest clue where to begin. Not only are we deprived of any substantial evidence to work with, but we still lack even a single motive to clue us in. Our only hint is that we found your school's insignia at one of the scenes. We had forensics run tests on the culprit's skin, but nothing's come up as of now. There was so little to tie the murders together that it almost appeared like it was just an accident. However, that incoherence vanished into thin air a week ago. Killing a person a day is a pattern we've never seen from them before."

He made a valid point. Even during the serial murders four years ago, there were only six victims in total despite stretching on from summer all the way to winter. This culprit's pace in the past week was clearly abnormal. According to Daisuke, the culprit behind this string of murders discreetly began their meaningless spree back during the fall of last year. Since the victims were only marked as missing by the police, they managed to avoid the eyes of the mass media. This year, however, the information leaked from the victims' families to the press. Thus began the second advent of the serial killings that once plagued this town.

"Do you understand why this shift in behaviour is so significant, Mikiya?"

"They ended up leaving too much evidence behind, huh?"

"Exactly," Daisuke responded in an unamused tone. "Can you believe it? We've been chasing this bastard for five whole years. In all that time, we couldn't even find a single witness, but in this past week they've made several massive screw-ups in a row. They've become a completely different person. Honestly, it makes me want to think some copycat's just taking advantage of the commotion."

"But all the crime scenes so far have matched up perfectly, right? The manner in which the murders were committed has yet to be revealed to the public, so it should be impossible for someone unrelated to replicate it."

"That's right. But still... we can't say for certain. If I had to categorise it, then I'd say the murders from four years ago were done for amusement. They toyed with and displayed the corpses as if they were the culprit's playthings. In other words, the textbook image of a psychotic deviant.

This time, however, things are slightly different. Most parts of the corpse are nowhere to be found. All that remains are the victim's severed limbs. It's just a possibility, but this inconsistency might be proof that these two cases might've been caused by two different people after all. Remember, it's practically impossible to hide a corpse when committing a roadside murder in a city like this. Yet even though they went through all that effort, they ended up forgetting about the limbs. It doesn't make any goddamn sense, right?

Well, the thing is, apparently it does to the geezers over at forensics. I am absolutely not playing around when I say this, okay? You see, they say these murders are the work of some large carnivorous animal. Have you heard any rumours of some collector's pet alligator escaping recently, Mikiya?"

"Not that I've heard of, no."

As I responded, I too decided to grab my coffee mug. Even leaving the whole alligator thing aside, this wasn't what I wanted to hear. He said that there was a possibility the murders from four years ago and this current case were committed by two completely different people.

I found myself at a complete standstill. Four years ago, Shiki declared herself a murderer. However, I knew that was a lie. She would never kill a person. Even if she wanted to, she could never do it. At least, that was what I believed all this time. But then why—why did I suddenly find myself beset with such uncertainty?

"Daisuke, what's up with the witness you mentioned?" I continued questioning him in order to dispel the anxiety growing within my mind.

He promptly began to speak. "The culprit stuck solely to the business district these past seven days. Since the murders have been taking place in the back alleys, there've been some people who passed through the crime scene. I wouldn't go so far as to call it evidence, but there are two things worthy of note that we found out. The first is that someone dressed in a kimono was spotted around the period the crime took place."

As calmly as I possibly could, I urged him to continue. "We haven't identified their gender, but there's clearly no way they're unrelated. We're actively searching for them in order to question them as a person of interest, so it probably shouldn't take too long. Personally, I'd say there's about a thirty percent chance they're the culprit. Well, the folks calling the shots seem convinced that this fellow's our monster in question, though. The other thing we found out is regarding the victims. Actually, I was thinking about getting your help for this part, my dear brother."

"That's unusual. You don't usually come directly to me for help."

A person dressed in a kimono was spotted at the crime scene. Only Shiki would ever walk around at night dressed in an outfit like that. My fingers were starting to go so numb that I felt like I would drop my mug. Even then, I tried to stop myself from losing my cool.

"Don't be so cold, man. You're pretty familiar with drugs, right? Types of drugs, the groups selling them, and all that."

"I dunno. I'd say I know a bit more than your average person, that's all. Don't you think the police would be better suited for something like that? I'm sure you guys have some specialists on your team."

"I sure can't deny that, but I wanted to hear the opinion of someone in a different position. Stubborn old farts aren't exactly the most trusted authority when it comes to the things you younglings are into these days. Unfortunately, that goes for this old man over here too."

Daisuke then proceeded to casually hurl a polaroid image and what seemed to be a hastily written report onto the table. The photo showed two bottles. One of them had some sort of stamp inside, while the other contained a leafy substance instead. The report had the words *THC* and *Mescaline* written down, and following them was a number denoting grams. Anyone could see that these materials were detailing illegal drugs.

"The paper stamp is LSD. The purity's the same as everything else going around the market recently. They don't seem to be too sure about the other one, though. If they detected cannabinoids in it, wouldn't that make the obvious answer cannabis?"

"They said they've never seen anything like it. The thing is, apparently it doesn't even contain any of those cannabinoids you mentioned. No THC, and no CBC either."

I couldn't help but grimace in confusion. In the first place, cannabis was only considered a drug because of psychotropic substances known as cannabinoids. Marijuana that doesn't contain any THC would be akin to a car without tires.

"Which means it isn't marijuana. Any chance it might be tochigishiro?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"It's a type of hemp that doesn't contain any psychotropic substances. Even Japan-grown hemp is composed of one percent THC or lower. For what it's worth, top quality marijuana from abroad has about eight percent. It's not exactly a negligible number. That's why they decided to artificially create a new cultivar of hemp—tochigishiro. Impressively enough, it only has one thirtieth of the THC that other existing variants have."

I heard him let out a slight gasp of admiration from the other side of the newspaper. Regardless, tochigishiro was mostly used for creating fabrics. In the end, the hemp they used to feed birds was still the dangerous type imported from overseas.

"So, what's the deal with this photo?"

"Over half of the victims this week were carrying this stuff. Well, most of them were kids who were just loitering around at night and up to no good, so it shouldn't be too much of a surprise that they were into drugs."

"That's quite a narrow-minded opinion, Daisuke." He sank into thought as I responded. "I get it now. So that explains why you wanted to know about the current trends. Honestly, I'm not too sure myself. I haven't met with anyone involved in that trade for about a year now. There's a possibility that turning it into a cocktail with acid is some new trend."

Acid was just another name for LSD. Some people also referred to it as blotter. First, you'd let it seep into a piece of paper the size of a stamp, then enjoy its hallucinogenic effects by putting it on the tip of your tongue. On the other hand, a cocktail was a blend of two different drugs. While it could result in increased potency, recklessly attempting a new

cocktail came with extreme risk. One famous example was the speedball: a blend of cocaine and heroin.

"Man, you really do know a lot. You'd better not be getting in with the wrong crowd, you hear me?"

"Of course not. This is stuff anyone can find out if they're curious enough. Just so you know, I have absolutely zero interest in drugs. I got all of my knowledge on this stuff from one of my upperclassmen in highschool. He was the son of a pharmacist, so he knew all sorts of things about drugs."

"Good. Your big bro's relieved to hear that." He then proceeded to stand up. "It's time to get to work. Ah, just one more thing. What sort of drug is marijuana, anyway? There are different types of drugs, like uppers and downers, right?"

I let out a sigh of exasperation. I couldn't believe that someone who'd been with the police for so many years didn't know something as basic as this.

"I'm surprised you haven't gotten fired yet, honestly. I suppose you could say marijuana's neither of them, strictly speaking. It's a convenient drug that can either be an upper or a downer. While scientists have developed an understanding regarding how other substances react with the brain, the same can't be said of the THC included in hemp. That means it possesses the properties of every other drug in this world. The effects of THC on the human body are too complex for us to comprehend and control at this point in time. Just remember, depending on its usage, it possesses the possibility to bring about a transformation beyond anything we can imagine."

Daisuke nodded, seemingly convinced, and then proceeded to head for the door. "The hell? It's raining." With those as his parting words, he hastily left for work.

"Seriously, all he ever does is complain right up until the end."

Regardless, there was no doubt he helped break me out of the sombre mood I'd been in. I quickly finished the rest of my breakfast and called Ms. Touko's office. When I told her I'd be taking the day off, she simply responded with a straightforward "Don't push yourself too hard," before ending the call. I slumped my shoulders in defeat, realising she saw right through me, and then proceeded to put on my light-green coat.

A week had already passed since Shiki disappeared. Ever since the murders became a nightly occurrence, she had neither returned to her own apartment nor her family home. None of us had seen or even heard from her in the past week. It was clear as day why she did that and what significance those actions of hers held.

If the same culprit behind the serial killings from four years ago had reemerged, then Shiki was definitely involved in some shape or form. I had no idea who was truly behind everything that had transpired. Even Shiki, who proclaimed herself as a murderer four years ago, lost her memories of that time, burying the truth in the darkness.

Perhaps I no longer had any hope of finding the truth out for myself. But even then, I couldn't just sit around and watch as everything unfolded without me. Before it was too late, I had to crack this case myself. After all, I was no mere bystander to this.

This case between Shiki Ryougi and Mikiya Kokutou had been at a standstill for four years, but time had finally begun to tick once more. In order to finally draw the curtain on this, for the first time in my life, I began an investigation not for someone else's sake, but for mine.

The entire city was clouded in a uniform blanket of grey. With my black umbrella in hand, I decided to visit the crime scenes and take a look for myself. The alley from the night before was sealed off by the police, but everywhere else was easy enough to make my way into. After sleuthing around three different crime scenes, the morning had already ended. If I wanted to investigate all of them, it'd be nighttime when I finished. While it wasn't completely fruitless, it'd be hard to say that I discovered anything of value.

Regardless, I had no other leads to work with. This basic investigation was the best I could muster up. Before moving on to the next stage of the investigation, I swore I wouldn't let even the most minute detail pass me by. I would even count the number of pebbles on the road if I had to. Honestly, even I was surprised that I could be so fixated on something.

As the rain continued to fall, I simply made my way from one alley to another. The cold winter rain was making it harder for me to settle down.

On that day three years ago, I began to detest the winter rain. Every single time, it brought me back to the moment I lost her right before my very eyes.

...

I... want to kill you.

Dressed in a single unlined kimono, the girl swung her knife down toward Kokutou Mikiya's throat. The girl before me, dampened by the pouring rain, was none other than Ryougi Shiki. Having been pushed to the ground and pinned down, I had no means of resistance against her.

All that awaited me was the creeping approach of death. A merciless slash to my throat, akin to the blade of a guillotine. However, my expectations were betrayed. Her blade had stopped the instant before it could pierce my skin.

Why?

It was none other than Shiki who had muttered those words. She couldn't bring herself to take my life with that knife of hers. What an utterly heart-rending sight. She was a being whose only purpose was to kill. Yet, the desire to not kill would lead the two of them to their mutual demise. I couldn't bear to witness that contradiction. I'd forgotten how to breathe due to the sheer amount of sorrow.

At the same time, I understood. That this was only a trifling moment of fortune. After all, she could never defy Ryougi Shiki. She gazed upon her frozen arm and cursed herself. How absolutely pathetic. Both these arms, and myself.

Rekindled by her anger, she once again swung her knife down. This time for certain, Kokutou Mikiya would undoubtedly meet his demise.

Yet at that very moment, an unknown being made its presence known to us. It was a man clad in a coat akin to a monk's garb. He launched a kick toward Shiki's flank, knocking her away from on top of me.

Fool. This is not the collapse I desired for you.

Then, the man helped me to my feet.

The next instant, Shiki dashed toward him with an even greater propulsion than she was knocked back with. Shiki's knife tore through his temple in a single assault. Blood began to spur for the singular, linear wound inflicted upon his face.

Shiki proceeded to sprint right past him and then glared directly at the man. He simply let out a slight chuckle of amusement in response.

So, even with me as your target, you cannot take a life. It appears his efforts were not completely in vain.

He took my hand and burst forth in a dash, while Shiki trailed behind us. However, his legs moved so fast that it felt like we were gliding through the air. As soon as we exited the grounds of the Ryougi estate, he let go of my hand. I realised I would be able to return home safely if I left without any second thought.

It is too soon for her destruction. The spiral of contradiction is the only demise suitable for her.

The man then vanished, leaving only those words behind. All that was left was a path back to the safe confines of my home, and the sound of Shiki's footsteps coming from behind me.

On that day, I decided that I would rather be with her than go home in solitude. Honestly, I still don't know if I made the right choice back then. Until the end, Shiki could not bring herself to kill me.

If I can't erase you...

As the rain cascaded upon her, she simply smiled at me fleetingly.

...then I'll just have to be the one to vanish instead.

She threw herself in the direction of a passing car's headlights right before my eyes. Within the pouring rain, I heard the sound of the driver scrambling to hit the brake. However, it wasn't fast enough. She collapsed into the damp asphalt like a broken doll, completely devoid of warmth.

That was the most painful period of my life. I doubt I will ever experience pain greater than I did on that day. My eyes were damp with tears. That I am certain of. And yet, even on that day, Mikiya Kokutou could not cry his sorrows away properly.

...

Even after the sunset, the rain continued to pour incessantly. It was an unusually cold night. As I held my black umbrella like I did then, I felt like I had returned to the snowy day when I first met her.

I took a peek at the night sky, but just as I expected, neither the stars nor moon had shown themselves. With my wavering and hesitant mind, I found myself hoping that Shiki wasn't feeling too cold under this chilly sky.

/ 1

▪

May.

I met a guy named Kokutou Mikiya, and was instantly drawn to him. He was so kind to me, despite who I was. I loved his genuine, unassuming smile.

▪

"Ugh, rain," I muttered in annoyance, swiping a vinyl umbrella from the convenience store stand.

I wandered for a while, but the trail had gone cold. The scent of blood had been washed away by the downpour and offered no further clues.

It was February 8th, just past dawn. The deserted streets were quiet, and I felt like the only soul venturing out. My aimless walk led me to a halt, and I found myself scrutinising my reflection as if it belonged to a stranger. I was clutching a cheap umbrella, wearing a grime-stained jacket and a mud-stained kimono. A mere week of sleeping in alleyways had left me remarkably filthy. I didn't care about my appearance, but I couldn't bear with the stench emanating from my own body any longer.

"No more camping out tonight," I declared, a hint of amusement creeping into my voice. The prospect brought a smile to my face for the first time in a week.

...

Ryougi Shiki, that's my name. With a surname signifying the division of the Taiji symbol into two, and a given name directly reflecting that meaning, I have always been an outsider, someone who doesn't conform to societal norms.

There was once a part of me, a suppressed personality named SHIKI, who derived pleasure from killing. SHIKI, pronounced identically to my name, was, I believe, the evil within me. For him, the will to kill was the primal emotion evoked by anything. He desired to kill

indiscriminately, every person he encountered. I had to suppress him countless times within my heart.

This was not merely a matter of one person suppressing their own desires within a single personality. No, I was killing another version of myself. But it wasn't because I abhorred the act of killing. It was simply to ensure that Ryougi Shiki could barely exist within the confines of society, to keep SHIKI's immoral actions in check.

The act of 'killing' itself was an irresistible temptation for me. A shadow that perpetually threatened me. I believe it was my grandfather's words that had me so tightly bound.

My father, though of the Ryougi bloodline, did not possess a dual personality. That's why he rejoiced at my birth and removed my elder brother, who was entirely normal, from the line of succession.

I was special from the moment I was born. I was always alone, and solitude was my norm. Yet, I never felt lonely. For I had another self within me, SHIKI.

When I was young, Ryougi Shiki was, in a sense, a singular entity. We did only what we desired and felt no sin in the act of killing. Then, when I turned six, my body matured enough to kill with the right tools, and my grandfather passed away.

My grandfather was an abnormal individual, much like me. Possessing a different personality within himself, he had tortured, crushed, and denied himself, leading to an ambiguous identity. For nearly twenty years, my grandfather was confined to his room. On his deathbed, he summoned me and imparted his final words. The old man, who had been insane for decades, regained clarity for a fleeting moment to leave those words, directed at Shiki.

I couldn't forget those words, and I grew up remembering that killing was important. The fact that I survived until sixteen without taking a life was likely due to my grandfather's influence. Shiki and SHIKI formed an alliance to protect each other and blend seamlessly into society. At least, until we encountered a man named Kokutou Mikiya.

After meeting Mikiya, I became warped. I realised that while I had blended into society, there had never been a moment where I truly lived within its norms.

...If only I hadn't known. I wished I hadn't known the warmth I could never possess. I yearned for it, but that yearning was also my undoing. No matter how much I tried to rationalise it, I was Shiki, the one who harboured a bloodthirsty monster within.

That's when the undeniable truth slammed into me: *I* was broken. I desperately wanted to deny that epiphany and return to my former self, the one who felt no suffering. But I failed.

From that point on, the bond between me and SHIKI began to fray. Though I had always understood his actions, I started to lose sight of them.

Four years ago, during the series of murders in my first year of high school, the memories belonged to SHIKI, not me. Shiki was merely an outsider to the incidents. Yet, my retinas remembered. I was always present at those murder scenes, a faint smile on my lips as I looked upon the blood-soaked corpses.

Mikiya witnessed one of those scenes, and despite that, believed in my innocence. It sparked a resolve within me. I couldn't afford to shatter any further. Unattainable happiness and impossible dreams were luxuries I didn't need. I had to utterly violate that carefree man, to transform myself into something terrible just to cope.

Then came the accident, causing me to slumber for two years. When I woke up from the coma, I was no longer the old Shiki. Having lost SHIKI due to the accident and feeling like even my own memories belonged to someone else, I was an empty shell. But the emptiness in my chest, caused by SHIKI's disappearance, had been filled, allowing me to exist in this state.

What a cruel twist of fate that the person who filled that void happened to be the same one who ruined me. I may no longer be an empty shell, but fragments of my past sins still tormented me. After recovering from the coma, I'd lost several crucial memories. Unlike SHIKI's memories, which were lost because he himself had died, my memories as Shiki hadn't been lost. I had simply buried those inconvenient events intentionally, before that meddling mage forced them to resurface.

...Yes, I remembered now. I remembered trying to kill Kokutou Mikiya three years ago. I remembered myself, a sinner, lingering at the murder scene. I remembered wandering the night, searching for prey.

To be honest, I couldn't tell who the culprit was. If someone accused me, I wouldn't deny it. After all, I could have easily become that person.

Just like four years ago, I couldn't stand my daily life. The reason was simple: I was consumed by jealousy of the monster and was driven to find them. If there was one, it would also mean that the perpetrator of the four-year-old incident wasn't SHIKI. But most importantly, I longed to kill them.

A realisation dawned on me. Four years ago, I craved killing because SHIKI was there. But now, he was gone. And yet, the desire persisted.

I wished I had realised sooner. And yet, I wished I hadn't realised so quickly. SHIKI knew only of killing. It was I, and no one else, who craved the act. A simple equation.

...

I stayed at a love hotel, the kind with a machine-operated front desk. Mikiya's words echoed in my mind. These places were perfect for disappearing. And he was spot on; a system that didn’t require proof of identity was certainly convenient.

After a quick shower, I crashed on the bed. I hadn’t meant to sleep, but when I woke up, it was just past two in the morning. Checking in around dusk meant I’d clocked over six hours. I woke up alone. It was the kind of wake-up I was used to, nothing out of the ordinary.

But I felt an unusual surge of irritation. I put on a new set of clothes roughly, as if taking my frustration out on the fabric. Why was I so agitated after a mere seven days? Or were they not mere days, but an excruciating eternity?

"Impossible," I scoffed, dismissing the thought. Time to leave.

It was past two in the morning. I walked through the slumbering back alleys, where even the plants seemed to doze. Patrolling police, a consequence of the recent murders, ruled out the main streets. The monster would likely follow suit. So, I became a spider navigating the web of narrow alleys, mirroring his movements.

I had no destination in mind. Just aimless wandering, a dance with chance. Maybe that's why trouble always seemed to find me.

“Drugs? Look elsewhere,” I barked, halting my stride. Silence.

At the alley's mouth, four figures emerged, surrounding me. Their vacant eyes held no hint of reason. Clearly, some illegal drugs had twisted them, their high taking a dark turn.

"...Guess there's no point talking to you people," I muttered under my breath.

The figures moved in unison. My hand drifted to my knife in my breast pocket. A sigh escaped my lips.

"Hell, I was bored anyway. You want a thrill? Fine, let's dance."

They closed in. Their intent was clear—senseless violence. I didn't resist. In fact, I welcomed it. The restless anxiety swirling in my chest felt like thick, choking mud.

So, I thought, maybe just for tonight, I could lose myself in it.

Murder Speculation / 2

▪

May.

It's time to talk about her. Every single time I see her face, I feel like I'm about to lose myself to insanity. My whole body goes numb, and I even forget how to breathe. This must be what it feels like to be bewitched at first sight. The act of looking at her is enough to drive me mad with infatuation. Sometimes I find myself wondering if I might lose my life to oxygen deprivation anytime soon. My life has been utterly devoured by my thoughts of her. It's nothing short of a miracle that she and I go to the same school. Yes, this must be what it feels like to be in love. I've never gotten the chance to speak to her, nor have I even heard the sound of her voice. With every passing day, my feelings for her continue to grow at a terrifying pace.

▪

The next day, February 9. While the rain ceased in the middle of the night, the curtain of clouds wouldn't let up even after dawn broke.

After spending most of last night investigating the various crime scenes, I crashed into my friend's apartment and spent the rest of the night there. All I could do was helplessly watch as the sun began to rise.

"You sure are up early, Mikiya. You gonna make me breakfast or something?"

The man rubbing his eyes in front of me was Gakuto, my friend. Of course, there was no way I would let him get off scot-free.

"There's nothing but beer in your fridge. What do you expect me to do with that?"

"Haha. Fair point. Well, guess it's time to go grab some ingredients from the neighbour," he said as he scratched his head.

Suddenly, he turned his large body toward me as if he had just seen a ghost. "Dude, have you seen how pale you are? You sick or something?"

I looked at the mirror. He was right; my face was as devoid of colour as a wax sculpture.

"Don't worry. It should be wearing off now. It's a fast-acting type that kicks in about ten minutes after ingestion. The effect lasts for approximately four hours. In my opinion, the synesthesia was stronger than the hallucinations."

"You've got some really sick interests, man. Did you screw around with those new drugs that've been going around?"

He took a quick glance at the stamp-sized shred of paper and cigarette I left on the table. I nodded and quietly stood up.

"Could you get rid of the marijuana for me? The acid shouldn't produce any negative effects, so go ahead and use it if you feel like entertaining yourself. You'll have way more fun with that than any amusement park out there, ain't no doubt about that."

I ended up saying something out of character. I picked up the coat I left on the floor and passed my shoulders through the sleeves. It was seven in the morning, just about time for the city to begin rousing from its slumber. I couldn't afford to waste any more time on anything unnecessary.

"Leaving already? At least rest for a bit, why don't you? You're barely even standing, you know."

"As much as I'd like to do that, something more important just came up."

Gakuto looked at me in puzzlement. I then pointed toward the powered-off television and began to repeat the content of the morning news I was watching moments ago.

"Today...no, yesterday's victim's been found. You know that famous luxury hotel, Pavillion? It happened at a back alley nearby. The kicker is, this time the lunatic slaughtered four people in one night."

Gakuto let out a gasp of admiration as he turned the television back on. Around this time period, all the channels were still running the news, so we would only find the same thing no matter where we looked. Everything was as I mentioned earlier. Except, there was one more key piece of information to add.

"The culprit was dressed in a kimono? The hell's that supposed to mean?"

I simply walked toward the door without responding to him. I'd lost my sense of balance because of the drugs, so I struggled as I put on my shoes. Gakuto peeked over toward me with the two drugs I left on the table in tow.

"Hey, Mikiya. I forgot to ask. What happens if you use both of them at the same time?"

"Trust me, you don't want to find out. You'll only end up understanding how it feels to be Hansel and Gretel."

With that as my response, I then walked out the door. It was clear why I had the complexion of a sick man. It had been because of that feeling. After all, I ended up feeling like the entirety of Gakuto's room was food. I spent the entire night desperately trying to curb my appetite.

...

The scene of last night's crime was only under an hour away by foot from Gakuto's apartment. Needless to say, there were officers corralling the entire place. The best I could do was watch from afar like the rest of the onlookers.

The actual crime took place in a cross-shaped intersection in the middle of the alley, so there was nothing for me to gain by loitering around the main street. I decided to keep walking, since staying for too long would only result in me needlessly attracting the officers' attention.

I thought about visiting Pavilion since it was nearby, but ultimately decided against it. They didn't have anyone at the reception who checked all the guests, nor was there any chance they'd be willing to show their security camera footage to a civilian like me. Even if Shiki had stayed there recently, she would've definitely fled already.

After leaving the area, I settled on paying a visit to the apartment of an acquaintance who lived nearby. This acquaintance of mine handled illegal drugs in this vicinity. In other words, they were a dealer. I'd only ever spoken to them on the phone, but I once helped solve a small problem that'd been troubling them before. When I cashed in on that debt and said I wanted to talk to them about recent events, we ended up concluding on meeting in person. With that decided, I made my way to the front door of their apartment.

They lived in an old, unpopulated two-floor apartment building away from the hustle and bustle of the city. My acquaintance was the only resident of this run-down building that was on the verge of collapse.

I wobbled up the stairs, and then knocked on the door situated on the edge of the second floor. I heard something rustling from the other side of the door. A few seconds later, the wooden door opened, and a woman with long brown hair appeared from within. She looked slightly older than me, with narrow eyes that made her seem like she was asleep. The woman, dressed in a red *hanten* apt for the cold winter, glanced curiously at my face.

"I'm the one who called this morning."

"Well, duh. Come on in. Hurry up, people aren't supposed to know that someone lives in this place."

She promptly retreated back into the confines of her room as I followed in bemusement. Her room was an utter mess, just like Daisuke's room. While the floor was primarily dominated by clothes and magazines, there was some sort of table in the middle of it all. As I saw her take a seat by the table, I realised it was a kotatsu. Noticing a dubious stare directed in my direction, I hesitantly entered the kotatsu. For some reason, it wasn't even turned on.

"So that's what you look like. Gotta say, pretty unexpected."

She laid her jaw onto the table and plopped her head down sideways. If anything, the fact that she turned out to be a woman was more unexpected to me. Perhaps in her line of trade, hiding her gender was the least she could do to keep herself safe.

"Nah, not really. I just enjoy dressing up like a guy."

"Huh?"

I couldn't hide my astonishment at the fact that she answered a question I hadn't even voiced out. She simply looked at me and began to giggle.

"Ahaha, you're pretty easy to read. I had a pretty different impression of you when we talked on the phone. I was expecting a more, uh, reptilian kinda guy. Y'know, the sly nerdy type that wears tiny glasses and thinks information is worth more than people. None of that matters to me in the end, though. So, what did you come to me for?"

The tone of her voice grew sharper in an instant. It felt as though she had a switch in her head that allowed her to instantaneously shift her state of mind. I began to question her, still startled by the sudden change in behaviour.

"First, I want to ask about last night. Did you hear the news? Apparently, someone witnessed the killer last night."

"You mean that psycho in a kimono and leather jacket? I didn't even have to look at the news to know. After all, I was the one who saw her with my own two eyes."

I'd completely forgotten to muster a single word, or even a single indistinct sound in response. The news had only stated that the suspect was dressed in a kimono, but she went as far as to provide a gender.

"If my memory serves me right, it was around three in the morning. I went outside when the rain stopped. Business hasn't been too good recently. Can't afford to spend all my time rolling around in here. You probably know already, but the people who were loitering around the hotel were regular customers of mine.

I hadn't heard from them in a while, but I figured I should at least give it a shot.

That was when I saw it. Four men struggling to take down a single girl. Talk about pathetic, right?"

She continued to recollect the events that transpired on the night before.

I'd begun to grind my teeth so audibly that even I could make the sound out, and my face had unconsciously warped into a scowl.

"You said they were a girl, but the news said their gender was still unknown. How were you able to tell when it was so dark out?"

"Hm? It was pretty obvious. I may have only seen her shadow since I didn't want to get too close, but her body had some pretty well-defined lines. You have a point, though. I suppose I can't say for certain since I only caught a glance of her. Wait, what's the big deal? Do you know who she is or something?"

She cast a probing look in my direction, her face still rested on the table. I simply remained silent in response.

"Well, that's none of my business, though. We both promised not to probe into anything personal. A word of advice from me, though. I'd give up on her if I were you. She clearly wasn't normal. I'd say I have a good eye for danger, considering the amount of psychos I've had to deal with in the past.

People who just want to enjoy themselves with drugs aren't anything to worry about. If they need to numb themselves in order to go wild, then that's because they're usually put

together. But people who can wreak mayhem without any sort of stimulation? Those are the ones that truly ought to be feared.

Last night, she was holding back even when she was surrounded by four men. She'd swing her knife at the idiots who tried to hit her, but they didn't bleed a single drop of blood. Still, she wasn't doing it because she didn't want to kill them. Do you get me? She was keeping them alive because she wanted to tear them apart with her knife as much as humanly possible. I don't know if the pain brought them back to their senses, or if they realised what'd happen to them, but they turned their backs to her and started to run away. That was the moment she finished them off with a slash to the back. She must've thought that there was no point in hunting any prey that would dare resort to escape. The last survivor got off the worst. He cried and begged to be spared, but that only meant he would die the longest and most painful death out of them. That was the end of it all. After killing all four of them, she just stood there in silence.

I wanted to see what she was doing, but our eyes met when I moved in order to take a peek. It was absolutely terrifying. Even though it was so dark that I could only make out a shadow, it felt as if her eyes alone had a blue glow to them. I was so afraid that I couldn't even scream, but looking back at it now, that might've saved my life. She would've gone after me if I let my voice out, I'm sure of it."

Without relying on any gestures, she used her voice alone to calmly lay out the events that transpired. As much as it hurt to admit, I didn't see any reason to doubt her words.

"Still, I'd say your story is a bit lacking in terms of credibility. You weren't close enough to see the culprit's face, and it's not like you saw any blood or corpses either, right?"

"Yeah. It wouldn't hold up as evidence. That's why I didn't bother telling the cops. In the first place, teaming up with those bastards is the last thing I'd ever do. That means there was another witness who claimed they saw someone in a kimono. That place is practically a hideout for a bunch of people in similar circles. It wouldn't surprise me if someone else was there aside from me."

"I see. Naturally, that'd mean they couldn't identify the culprit's gender, huh?"

"I guess. Still, something doesn't make sense. If they were able to make out the murderer's clothing, then there shouldn't be any reason why they wouldn't know. The first thing that should spring to mind after seeing her shadow would normally be her tight skirt. She was wearing some sort of jumper on top of her kimono, so it's not like you could make out the sleeves. Honestly, I was pretty proud of myself for realising it was a kimono, but it looks like there's someone else out there with a pretty sharp eye. If that's really the case, then don't you think something's off?"

"I see what you mean. Anyone who saw a tight skirt would assume they were a woman. I don't see how they'd be able to make out the culprit's clothing without realising their gender."

It all felt too good to be true. It was hard enough to believe that everything taking place was even real. The fact that everything was progressing so smoothly made it all seem even more like a work of fiction. The culprit's actions were progressively getting bolder and bolder. At the same time, the details of their murders were steadily being exposed to the light. An

image of the culprit's identity was slowly continuing to take shape with each uncovered card. It felt just like...

"Like we're playing a game that some kid devised, right?"

Wearing a grin on her face, once again, she voiced out a thought I hadn't even put to words yet. As I turned my gaze down in bewilderment, she rolled over the kotatsu while grinning like a cat.

"Is that the only thing you wanted to know? If so, then that's all I have to say."

I had to take a moment to think before I replied. I'd completely lost my breath when I came across the news this morning. The irrefutable truth was that someone in a kimono was spotted at the crime scene. I came all this way in order to find out who that person was and in order to prove that it wasn't Shiki. Yet in the end, the only truth I unearthed was another damning piece of evidence.

However, that wouldn't be enough to stop me. This time was no different from four years ago. I still hadn't ascertained a single thing with my own two eyes.

"That's enough about last night," I said in an attempt to calm myself down. There were two more things I intended to question her on. "This is just something that popped into my head. Is this really the first time anyone's seen the culprit? While it's especially true for this past week, even the murders from before have taken place in areas most people don't usually frequent. Unlike four years ago, though, all of the crime scenes have been in the city. Even if no one's seen them in the act, don't you think it's fairly likely there'd be someone who witnessed a suspicious individual around that time frame?"

"You're right. The logic does line up. There's just one problem, though. Most of the murders haven't taken place in our territory. Us dealers want to avoid getting involved with the cops, and our customers have no reason to help them out either. People involved in drugs would definitely be deemed suspicious by your average folk, so if anything, a regular civilian would stand out more to us. If some lady in a kimono happened to catch our sight, then that'd go doubly so. Only a rich old lady would wear a kimono in this day and age. Imagine someone like that wanting to buy drugs. That'd be way too suspicious. Way, way, way too suspicious."

With her cheeks still rubbing against the table, she emphasised her words as though she were repeating some sort of signal.

"I see. In other words, when you're constantly engaged in shady activities, people wouldn't think you're doing anything out of the ordinary. For example, since you're a drug dealer, no one would be surprised if you were in a crime scene. To the witnesses, it'd just seem like you're living out your everyday life."

She pouted in response to my words. Considering the lack of a rebuttal, though, it seemed as if she took no issue with my train of thought.

"I told you a while ago, right? Most people who buy drugs tend to be put-together. Now that things have escalated so much, there should at least be someone out there who's willing to sell us out."

"Exactly. Yet, the first sighting only happened yesterday, which can only mean one of two things. Either no dealers or buyers were previously witnessed during the timeframe in question, or that even if someone was sighted, the witness decided that they had to cover for that person instead. Taking into consideration the amount of murders that have already taken place, the fact that there have been no witnesses is strange in and of itself."

"You think? Doesn't that just mean that no one actually saw anything?"

"That only applies when there's no one around to witness the crime. You know how people often use locked rooms in books and stuff? It's the same as that. Absolutely pointless. Attempting to conceal it is tantamount to declaring the existence of a crime. The culprit might as well be raising their hand at that point."

"Hrm? I'm too stupid to keep up with all this, you know. A locked room is a trick the culprit uses so that they can get away with murder, right? What's the problem with that?"

"It's still murder, isn't it? If there's a locked room with a corpse inside, then it serves as proof that no crime was committed by a person on the outside of it. They seal the place shut in order to prevent themselves from inconveniencing anyone. That is the only reason for a locked room to exist. If someone has been found dead in a locked room, then it must be a suicide and nothing else. As soon as they open the locked room, they see a corpse. Next, everyone begins to question how the culprit was able to pull the crime off in a seemingly impossible situation. If things come to this, then the culprit has already failed to conceal their crime.

Do you understand? A locked room loses all significance if it isn't a suicide. A locked room must only be employed when no one will suspect the existence of a murderer. After all, if the locked room becomes the scene of a crime, then that would erase all meaning in creating such a situation in the first place. It may seem contradictory, but having no witnesses in a scene where they should be expected is bizarre. Don't you think it'd be much more odd if a murder that happened in the middle of town ended up having no witnesses at all?"

She breathed a sigh of understanding and lifted her head off the table.

"Expect there were. Me, and the other person."

"That's exactly what I meant. If there were witnesses for last night's crime, then that should also apply for the ones before it."

It was quite a forceful line of reasoning, but I was absolutely certain. If last night's crime truly was the only one to be witnessed, then that'd serve as proof that it was a separate case in and of itself.

"I get it. There haven't been any witnesses because they've been making sure they won't get caught by anyone. The murderer wouldn't be so careless as to kill in a place where they'd be spotted."

She crossed her arms with a troubled look on her face. Once again, I felt like she read my mind before I could even speak.

"You're a pretty smart guy, aren't you? No wonder you give off the impression of a four-eyes even on the phone. So which one do you think it is, then? Was last night a completely different case entirely, or were all the previous witnesses simply overlooked?"

"Isn't that obvious?"

Even though I had let my anger get the better of me, I couldn't answer her question. If I told her I wanted both to be true, then that'd make my previous opinion sound like a contradiction. As I turned my gaze away from her in frustration, she began to giggle once again.

"So that's it, huh? Well, you are a boy, after all. What do you intend to do about it? Are you gonna try and prove her innocence?"

"There's one more thing I need to ask before that. Actually, this is the main reason I wanted to talk to you. Can you tell me who's been selling the new cocktail that's going around?"

"Aha. Bold move, four-eyes."

Her once feline smile morphed into one of fearlessness as she glanced at me from the side. The easygoing mood that once enveloped the room immediately began to seize and tense up.

"You mean that new dope of acid and marijuana, right? We usually call that mix Mudra, but this new one's unlike anything I've ever seen before. Just a single dose is enough to get you dependent for life, and to top it all off, it's so potent that constantly being on it is enough to wreck your body. Personally, I believe that drugs are meant to be used for recreation, but you can't really call it that when the pleasure puts your life at risk. In that sense, the fact that it's illegal is the least of our problems here."

"Is it that bad? I did get pretty nauseous when I tried it out, but everything else was just at the standard level for me."

"The ones going around are, yeah. You know how they can cause dependency and resistance? By resistance, I mean how your body gets more accustomed to the drug's effects every time you ingest it. People who use drugs that are easy to build a resistance against have to spend more money to up their dose. As for dependency, well, there's the physical kind and the mental kind, but put simply, it refers to how hard it is to function without a certain drug. The greater the dependency caused by the drug, the more times you'll have to use it in order to go about your life.

In the end, it's just the person in question's self-control that matters, though. I'd say it's an easier decision to make than a chainsmoker quitting. People say that drugs will destroy your life, but that's merely a baseless accusation. It really all comes down to the strength of a person's will. If you ask me, coffee, cigarettes, and alcohol are way more dangerous than most drugs. Honestly, I want some politician to tell me why those are deemed legal and the drugs I sell aren't."

She gripped her fist tightly as she continued her tirade. I was in no position to either back up or deny her claims, so all I could do was lend a listening ear.

"Well, some really terrible drugs that can build both resistance and tolerance at the same time are out there, that I can't deny. Those drugs truly will destroy your life. I absolutely

detest drugs like those. So I'm sorry, but I got nothing useful on the person who's been dealing Bloodchip. I've never met them, nor do I even want to know what sort of person they are."

I'd never heard of a drug that went by that name before.

"Bloodchip?"

She responded to my question with a cutesy nod.

"It's the name of that new cocktail. That stuff barely costs anything too. Two sheets of paper and ten grams of weed, and this is all one set costs."

She used her fingers to sign a price. If she was right, then that price really was next to nothing. The Japanese rate was usually several times more expensive than the price you got in other countries, but the number she gave me was even lower than that. Put simply, it was a price that was plenty accessible with a high schooler's allowance.

"Sounds like one of those fast food joints that sacrifices business in order to create trends."

“Right, but they've been selling at this price for a decent while now. They don't do that crap the yakuza always pulls. You know, waiting for them to get hooked and resistant before jacking up the price. On top of that, they give out even better stuff to the clients who aren't satisfied enough. The higher-quality product they hand out is a sheet of paper called Bloodchip. It may just be high-purity LSD, but everyone's been raving about it. You're usually meant to ingest paper orally, right? The kicker is, this product's supposed to give you an even better high than injecting it directly into your veins. Not that I've tested it out for myself, though."

"Has that news gotten around yet?"

"Mhm. A good chunk of people in the industry have heard of it. I'm more surprised that you hadn't found out yet, honestly. Dealers of Bloodchip only sell to kids, so a lot of the big players haven't heard about the new swing. Because of that, word's gotten around the dealers who operate on street-level, but the higher-ups of their organisations don't seem too concerned. They think it's just some toy for children to entertain themselves with. That's also why the police don't know jack about Bloodchip. Those guys only ever have the yakuza in their sights. They couldn't care less about looking into independent dealers like me," she said as she chuckled happily.

In contrast to her gleeful mood, I couldn't have felt any worse. That was the first I'd ever heard of Bloodchip. The dealer who I got the cocktail from didn't mention anything about it. I had no way of knowing whether he simply chose to keep his mouth shut, or if he didn't say anything precisely because it was me.

"Thanks. I'll put that information to good use."

I stood up after expressing my thanks. I'd heard everything I needed to hear, so all I had to do next was take action.

"Don't do anything too reckless. To the people hooked on Bloodchip, their dealer behind it is practically a messiah to them. I mentioned business hasn't been going too well, right? I'm the only dealer who isn't involved with Bloodchip here, y'see. I refuse to deal with terrible drugs like that. I ended up losing a lot of the customers I used to have because of that. It

almost feels like everyone's gotten roped into some sort of new cult," she grumbled in discontent with her legs still under the blanket.

While making sure to avoid all the clutter on the floor, I made for the doorknob and placed my hand on it. Without turning to face her, I asked one final question. To be frank, I wasn't expecting to get an answer.

"By the way, do you know the name of that dealer?"

"Oh, you haven't heard yet?"

She then proceeded to give me a name. I nearly fell to my knees when I heard that name. However, that single piece of information was enough to tie every disconnected piece of the puzzle together. After mustering as much levelheadedness as I could, I thanked her once more before heading out into the city with overcast skies.

/ 2

▪

June.

My life has never felt fuller. I never realised how much joy could come from being able to speak my heart with someone. After school and during breaks, I find myself eagerly anticipating our meetings. And when I'm with him, my heart races, a painful thrum in my chest. The constant unease that usually plagues me is replaced by this exhilarating pain. I must admit: my world is now divided. And one half of it belongs to Kokutou Mikiya.

▪

The sun had long vanished when I awoke. From the rooftop where I'd sought refuge, I leaped across to the neighbouring building. Restricted to authorised personnel only, this makeshift bed was a risky venture. I'd scaled the nearby rental building, seeking solitude on this deserted rooftop. This absurd routine had become my reality for over a week.

Exiting into the alleyway, an odd sense of unease crept up on me. My skin, honed from birth, screamed danger. Cautiously navigating the backstreets, I stumbled upon a discarded newspaper. February 9th's headline. The bloodthirsty monster dominated the front page, containing details of the suspect.

"...Four murdered, kimono-clad figure..." I muttered, tilting my head.

What was this? Four victims? Could they be the thugs from last night? Dead, it seemed. *Did that mean... I killed them?* My aggression last night was unusual. But then again, I'd been chasing shadows–a monster who might not even exist. Like three years ago, maybe I lost control. A moment of contemplation later, I discarded the paper.

"I don't know anything about this," I mumbled, setting off again.

Was this heightened awareness the reason for the prickling sensation? Increased vigilance was now paramount. I'd have to delve deeper into the back alleys, seek refuge in the

grimiest corners... I'd have to abandon more and more of my humanity. A painful, meaningless task, yet I couldn't stop.

The absurdity of it all gnawed at me. Why did I persist? I existed on scraps, sleep fragmented, aimlessly wandering the night streets like a fugitive.

What was the point, Shiki? What drove me? As I stalked my prey, a predator in the night, I wondered if I was becoming the very monster I hunted. Or perhaps, that was precisely what I craved for.

Killing is wrong, Shiki.

Those words echoed in my mind, deepening my already unpleasant mood. Pushing those thoughts aside, I pressed on into the night, yearning for it to be over. Right. I needed to finish this quickly and go home...

■

It was past two in the morning. The city was a corpse, devoid of life. No pedestrians roamed the streets, no cars roared with life. Buildings were shrouded in darkness, the moon and stars hidden behind a veil of clouds. A night of stillness, a night of nothingness. Yet, something was amiss. On the main street...

—— I saw a figure in the distance, beneath a streetlamp.

Ryougi Shiki stopped in her tracks.

—— The figure's movements were peculiar.

She had witnessed a very similar sight before.

—— And for some reason, I followed it.

A shiver crept up her throat, but Shiki pressed on, drawn into the shadowy alleyway.

...

The alleyway delved deeper, a descent into a different world. A dead end, more akin to a sealed chamber than a passage. Encased by towering walls, the narrow path was perpetually shrouded in darkness. This urban blind spot had once been a haven for a homeless man's dreams. But that was no longer the case.

Fresh paint masked the wear on the flanking walls. The narrow, almost nonexistent path glistened with an unknown slickness. The usual stench of rotten fruit was overwhelmed by a far more pungent odour. The ground was now a sea of blood.

What initially appeared to be spilled paint was, in reality, a horrifying volume of human blood. The liquid, still seeping and flowing, was undeniably human. The stench that assaulted the senses was a thick, sticky scarlet.

At its heart lay a human corpse, its face obscured. Both arms were missing, the legs severed at the knees. The body, no longer human, was a broken sprinkler, spraying blood. The severed limbs were nowhere to be found. In fact, the limbs hadn't been severed; they'd been brutally torn apart by a creature with jaws sharper than any guillotine.

A sickening crunching sound echoed, the primal sound of flesh being consumed. This was undeniably an alien world. Even the tide of blood had been overwhelmed by the warm, feral stench of beast.

—— And then, a figure emerged from the scene.

A white, serpentine lower body. A red jacket, the colour of blood. A knife, dangling from a limp right hand. The figure's gender was obscured by the haphazard, shoulder-length cut of their hair. From the silhouette, they could have been her twin, save for one striking difference: the colour of their hair. The golden hair, reminiscent of a lion's mane, fluttered in the corrupt alleyway wind. The carnivorous king of the savannah.

...

"..."

A familiar scene assaulted Shiki's senses. A memory, lost to the depths of her mind, flickered to life.

Yes, four years ago, at summer's end, she had lived through this very nightmare. Just like tonight, a suspicious figure had stalked the lifeless city streets. She had given chase, only to find herself standing before a corpse. The gap between pursuit and discovery remained a gaping hole in her memory. It was SHIKI, not Shiki, who bore the weight of that experience.

"What the hell are you?" Shiki muttered, her gaze flitting between the corpse and the figure mirroring her own form at the alley's entrance. The golden-haired Shiki trembled, not out of fear, but with glee.

"Ryougi... Shiki."

The figure turned slowly, its golden mane cascading down its back. The face was eerily similar to her own. Like staring into a coloured mirror, Shiki examined her golden doppelgänger. Crimson eyes, unnatural in their vibrancy, glared out from beneath the figure's brow. A silver earring glinted from its earlobe. Clothed in a stark contrast to Shiki's muted palette, the figure revealed in its garish attire: a flowing white skirt and a thick, scarlet leather jacket. But this was no woman. The golden-haired Shiki wasn't the same person; it was a young man, branded a bloodthirsty monster.

"I know you..." Shiki murmured.

With a glint of steel in his hand, he charged. He sprinted through the narrow alley, his form low to the ground. He aimed straight for the stationary Shiki, his movements pure and devoid of hesitation. She reacted instantly, her knife flashing into view as her brow furrowed in surprise.

The approaching figure moved with an inhuman grace, slithering like a serpent. The narrow alley became a vast hunting ground for the monster. The figure slipped through Shiki's senses, a beast undetected by her eyes and skin. Though visible, its movements were beyond her comprehension. In that split second, the distance narrowed to killing range for him, but remained a desperate reach for Shiki. The snake shed its coiling form, erupting into a ferocious beast. With an explosive burst, it launched itself towards Shiki's head, its knife aimed at her skull. A metallic clang echoed as their blades met, Shiki's own knife raised in defence. For a fleeting moment, their gazes locked, as if their weapons were extensions of themselves. Shiki's gaze burned with cold hostility, while the monster's eyes blazed with manic glee.

With a twisted grin, he leaped back, landing with the agility of a spider. A single, fluid motion had put six metres between them. He braced himself on his hands and knees, panting like a beast, a creature clearly beyond the bounds of humanity.

"Why?" he roared, his voice raw with accusation. "Why aren't you fighting seriously?"

The corpse served as a backdrop to his blood-slicked form. Shiki, the girl, offered no response, her gaze fixed on this distorted reflection of herself.

"You've changed from four years ago. You could have ended me right now, but you won't cross that line. I've been craving a companion for all this time, but you... you aren't good enough now."

His breaths were ragged, his heart a raw, beating drum. Surprisingly, the madman seemed to possess enough rationality to carry a conversation. He gasped for air, his body teetering on the brink of collapse. But whether it be from exertion or excitement, Shiki couldn't decide. She pondered it briefly, then dismissed it. It was a detail ultimately irrelevant.

"So it seems," she replied coldly. "With such a sweet name, I assumed you were female. Although, you did say that that last conversation would be our final one, didn't you, Senpai?"

The monster shook his head, a wry smile playing on his lips.

"Who knows?" he replied, stifling his laughter. "It was so long ago, I've forgotten."

Contrary to his tone, an undeniable glee radiated from him. Shiki felt no such amusement. Her sole purpose was to find and eliminate the monster, regardless of who he was.

"How many have you killed?" Shiki demanded, her eyes hardening into slits.

"Don't be ridiculous," he scoffed. "Do you think a madman remembers his own actions? Of course not! Spare me the boring questions. Why should someone crazy be expected to conform to society? That's why for three whole years, no one's accused me of murder. You see, I'm untouchable. I can kill without being punished. If anything, everyone expects me to take more lives with each passing day.

Ah, but I left such obvious clues, didn't I? All for your sake! I purposely left the bodies in plain sight, hoping you'd recall the events of four years past, but you chose to ignore them instead. Well, it worked out in another way, wouldn't you say?

A bloodthirsty monster, yes! A perfect title the world bestowed upon my nameless self! I was so thrilled that I did everything I could to prove myself worthy of that name this week! A monster has to kill to meet expectations, right?

You understand that, Ryougi. That's why you were so jealous, why you searched for me. You desired freedom too, and that led you to find someone like yourself. Oh, I know. I know everything. Because I understand you better than anyone else!"

The ragged breaths echoing in the alleyway grew increasingly menacing. The monster's tongue darted out, tracing his blood-stained lips. A creature that resembled her, his eyes wild and bloodshot, stood before her.

Shiki uttered nothing in response. Intense disgust had rendered her speechless. The mere thought of speaking to him was repulsive. Even if a terrible truth lay hidden in his words, she yearned to deny it.

—— That she longed to be a bloodthirsty monster.

A subtle frown creased her brow, a fleeting expression she hoped would go unnoticed. But the monster, with his heightened, beastly senses, caught the flicker of emotion. A twisted grin swept across his face.

"See! You're holding your true self back. You already knew the truth from the start, no?" he taunted. “The reason you can't find fulfilment is because you fight your very nature. There's no need to resist. Just unleash your desires!”

Shiki remained silent, her gaze fixed on the creature sprawled at her feet, her repugnance mirroring that of someone viewing a loathsome pest.

"Very well," the monster conceded. "If no amount of convincing will bring you back to who you once were, then I'll just have to eliminate the source of your conflict. I'll simply kill whoever's holding you back. A simple solution, don't you think? I'm sure you understand that I mean every single word I say, right? You want him dead just as much as I do!"

The monster laughed, his mirth tinged with pure enjoyment. Yet, in that very moment, his arm was severed by Ryougi Shiki, who had materialised before him without warning.

"Who..."

"...Huh?" The monster couldn't comprehend it. Ryougi Shiki's actions, executed with an impassive face and only her blue eyes gleaming, were imperceptible to him. Her movements, as swift as a predator stalking its prey, were beyond the human eye's capacity to perceive. Even with the monster's heightened senses, he couldn't track her movements. The knife that had severed his arm was now aimed at his neck.

"...the hell did you say you'll kill?"

"Eek!" The monster shrieked, launching himself backward.

But retreat would never allow him to outrun Shiki. To escape, he had to flee to a place beyond her reach. Thinking on his feet, he sprang onto the wall surrounding the alleyway and then vaulted higher. With a movement akin to a flying squirrel, he easily gained a safe distance. The monster clung to the side of the building, twenty metres above the ground, fearfully surveying the scene below.

—— A death god, her eyes a chilling blue, regarded him from the earth below.

The killing intent that radiated from her pierced his entire body like a blade. Fear seized him first, but was soon replaced by a consuming ecstasy.

"Ah, I knew it," he breathed, "You really are the real deal!"

Standing before him was a true monster, that much was certain. A being of his world, finally unveiled. And he understood precisely the reason for her revelation. By merely hinting at the demise of a specific individual, Ryougi Shiki had transformed into a predator far superior to himself.

"It's simple," he mused, "I need only eliminate the obstacle."

He vanished into the night, scaling the wall and disappearing from the alleyway. Shiki pursued, but none could outpace him in flight. This city, devoid of trees, was his jungle, where lurking and hunting were second nature. Under the moonless sky, the monster howled with joy. His four-year-old obsession was finally on the brink of fruition.

Murder Speculation / 3

▪

July.

I detest weak people. Those were the words she admonished me with.

I detest weak people. She rejected me without a second thought.

I detest weak people. I couldn't understand why she said those words to me.

That night, I hit someone for the first time.

That night, I killed someone for the first time.

▪

February 10, a cloudy day with patches of sunlight. The weather report playing on my car's stereo indicated that today's weather wouldn't be too different from yesterday. I took a peek at my watch while holding the wheel. The clock had just struck twelve.

On a normal day, I would've been questioning Ms. Touko on her unaccounted expenses by now, but I had taken two successive days off work. I was rushing through a wide road in the more industrial part of town. Needless to say, I was using a car instead of my own feet. Ms. Touko told me not to push myself too hard, but I had to do everything I could.

The murders showed no signs of stopping. I knew exactly where last night's crime scene was. After all, it was where the first victim of the serial killings was discovered four years ago. It may have been a mere coincidence, but to me it seemed like a harbinger that things had taken an irreversible turn for the worse. I couldn't afford to waste any more time. An entire day had already passed since I left my acquaintance's apartment and began investigating. I eventually found out that the dealer behind Bloodchip lived in an apartment by the harbour, so I decided to make my way there.

I began to notice more and more large trucks instead of cars the closer I got to the vicinity. The sea was tainted in a dull grey tone by the clouds hanging above it. I simply continued driving.

Last summer, they were constructing a large passage that they called the Broad Bridge. Midway through the project, the entire structure was decimated by a passing typhoon. Apparently, there weren't any plans to reconstruct it yet.

My destination was situated in an area with a perfect view of the ruins. I got out of the car while the ocean breeze blew in my direction. The chilly winter air was like a gust of ice numbing my skin. The desolate harbour felt several times colder than the lively city. Surrounded by countless warehouses on both sides, I began walking to my destination.

The exterior of the apartment was in tatters, possibly due to the salt in the wind. It was a two-story wooden building, but anyone who passed by would mistake it for an abandoned ruin. Based on what I'd heard, the dealer of Bloodchip wasn't a tenant but actually the rightful owner of this building. Until four years ago, however, the property belonged to a man named Araya. Because of that, discovering where my target lurked really wasn't much of a challenge.

I knocked on all six doors in order to see if any of the rooms were inhabited. I took a moment to consider my next move before deciding to sneak into the room on the corner of the second floor.

A single screwdriver was enough to destroy the lock of its thirty-year-old door. Even I was surprised that I had resorted to such forceful measures. Regardless, the integrity of my actions was the least of my concerns at that point. I went through the door and into the kitchen.

"Bingo."

It was a small apartment, with the kitchen directly connected to the front door. Further back was a single bedroom about eleven square metres wide. It was a quintessential low-cost apartment from the seventies. The bedroom wasn't all too different from the apartment I visited yesterday. I took a peek from the kitchen, but all I saw was a decrepit room that looked like it had been ravaged by a typhoon.

Outside the single curtainless window, a vast expanse of sea stretched out far beyond. It felt oddly out of place. It was like a piece of fine art hidden within the ocean of garbage scattered throughout the room. The unobstructed view of the leaden ocean made me feel as if I could even hear the sound of the waves crashing.

I proceeded further in as though I were being drawn in by that prospect. In that very instant, a chill ran down my spine. It felt as though blood was pooling at the back of my head. It took everything I had to even remain standing. I surveyed the entire room with my eyes. I wasn't looking for anything in particular. And even if the recipe for Bloodchip was lying around somewhere, it wouldn't be of any help to me. I just needed to find something that'd clue me in the right direction, no matter how vague it was. However, there was no need for that.

"Shiki."

I grabbed one of the photos scattered throughout the room. Printed on it was an image of Shiki from back when we were still in high school. That wasn't all of it, however. There were even canvases with portraits of her painted onto them. Every single thing in this room was about Shiki and nothing else. It had everything from four years ago until the present day,

even photos from when she temporarily transferred into Reien Girl's Academy in January of this year. None of the things you'd need to function as a human being were present here.

A tiny room overlooking the sea, filled to the brim with the hollow remains of Ryougi Shiki. It was like peering inside the owner's body. A person's room was a representation of their individual world. However, when you could no longer contain those adornments within you, it could no longer function as your world. Instead, it became a reflection of your interior.

I was terrified to my utter core. I realised that attempting to reason with the creator of this room may only prove futile. The rational choice was to escape before he could come back. But even then, I decided that I wanted to talk to him. No, I didn't want to—I *needed* to talk to him. As I remained in the room, I noticed a book lying on a table by the window. It was a diary binded with a green spine. It was left out in the open, as if its writer desired for it to be read.

"So this is where this room's heart lies, huh."

I picked up the diary. Just as its creator plotted, I prepared to open the lid on Pandora's box.

...

I'd lost all sense of time. I could only stand in silence within the derelict room until I read the final page of his diary. It was a record of a certain murder. It happened four years ago, at the spur of the moment. That was when it all began. I took a single deep breath and turned my gaze to the ceiling.

The first entry started in spring. The very first page, the very first line of his diary had been perfectly printed into my memory. It was the beginning of his story, an account of the first time he laid his eyes on a certain girl. Those words were...

April, 1995.

That was when I first met her.

Suddenly, those words were hurled at me from the direction of the door. A set of footsteps began to draw closer. He waved his hand at me with an affable smile on his face.

"Long time no see, Kokutou. It's been three years, right?"

"————!"

My voice wouldn't even come out due to the shock. He showed up in the exact same outfit as Shiki. A woman's skirt, and a red leather jumper. Scattered, shoulder-length hair, and androgynous features. However, his hair was blonde, and his eyes were blood-red like a rabbit's, as if he'd put on contacts.

"You came faster than I expected. I honestly didn't think you'd find this place so soon," he said, hanging his head in dissatisfaction.

"I didn't think so either."

"Hm. Did I mess something up along the way? I'm almost certain I erased all possible traces ever since we last spoke at that diner."

"No, you yourself didn't make any mistakes. It's just that I had a big hint to work with. You know about that condo they demolished last November, right? I got a chance to look into its residents right before it was torn down. That was when I just so happened to come across your surname. It'd been bothering me all this time. That building wasn't just your average condo. If you were there, I figured you had to be involved with Shiki in one way or another. Turns out I was right, Shirazumi Lio."

He swept back his hair and nodded in approval.

"I see. So it was the register. How hard could it be for that Araya to just keep his hands to himself? Thanks to his meddling, I ended up face-to-face with the last person I wanted to see. And way before I intended to, no less."

He flashed a troubled smile and set foot inside the room. It was then that I finally realised his left arm had been severed completely.

"Looks like you've already pieced everything together. Let's cut to the chase and start with that winter day three years ago. It was no coincidence that you and I bumped into each other when you went to visit Ryougi Shiki. I called out to you because I felt that you deserved to see the murder she committed. In the end, Araya deemed me a failure because of my needless interference. But even then, I don't regret the decision I made that day even a single bit. I couldn't bear to lose you before you ever found out about her true nature."

He took a seat on the table as he began to reminisce on the past. Nothing about him was any different from four years ago. I couldn't believe it. When I read his diary and heard about Bloodchip, I was convinced that he'd become a different person entirely. Yet here he was, exactly as I remembered him. He was the kind upperclassman that remained in my memories. Even the murder he wrote about in his journal wasn't completely his fault. I'd realised the truth. It only came to this because of the late Araya's schemes and an unfortunate accident. Even if that were the case, I had to bring his sins to light.

"Four years have already passed. You've committed too many sins to count since then."

I looked him straight in the eye. He shifted his gaze slightly away from me in response, and nodded in approval.

"I won't deny that. You have to understand, though. I wasn't the one responsible for the serial killings four years ago. Every single victim of that case died at the hands of none other than Ryougi Shiki. The only reason I was there before her was because I felt that I had a duty to keep you safe."

"You're lying, Lio."

I took a piece of Bloodchip out of my pocket and let it slide off my hand. The red stamp began to flutter as it slowly descended to the ground. He merely watched with a pained look in his eyes as it fell.

"Tell me. Is this what you wanted to accomplish?"

Back when I was still in high school, he dropped out because he'd found something he wanted to do. He shook his head to the side.

"The truth is, things didn't go the way I wanted them to. I got cocky just because I had some shoddy expertise on drugs since I was a kid. Believe me, all I wanted to create was a drug that could set me free. Why did everything have to end up like this?"

Biting down on his smile of self-derision, he cradled his body with his remaining arm. It looked like he was trying to support his trembling body. Noticing the direction of my gaze, he glanced toward his left arm.

"This? It's exactly as you thought, Ryougi Shiki did this to me. I didn't think losing an arm would be a big deal, but it looks like I've got no hope of getting it back. I suppose this is what it means to kill something. Even though I can heal the wound, there's no bringing back the part of me that died. Araya once told me that the ability of revival was only within the realm of magicians."

Magicians. Back then, I never would've expected to hear that word from his mouth. However, this had all been set in stone since four years ago. From the day that Araya Souren saved Shirazumi Lio after he unwittingly took his first life, when that same mage saved me from Shiki. Our courses had already been set in motion then. Even so, he still had to atone for the sin of murdering a fellow human being.

"Why have you continued killing more people all this time?"

As I began to interrogate him, he closed his eyes and responded. "I'm not doing this because I want to." He placed the palm of his hand on his chest as he muttered in agony. He then gripped his chest hard as though he were scratching at it. "I've never once taken a life out of my own desire to do so."

"Then why?"

"Kokutou, do you know what an Origin is? Since you're working with Aozaki Touko, I assume you've at least heard of it. It's the true nature, the very starting point of each being. An Origin is something that defines the direction your life will take. I had my Origin awakened, you see. By Araya Souren, that demon in human skin."

Unfortunately, I'd never gotten the chance to learn about such things. It wasn't like I could sympathise with his pain without having an understanding of it.

"I'm not too sure what that all means, but I suppose that's the reason why you have to keep killing, yes?"

"Right. Honestly, even I don't know that much about this stuff. Perhaps Aozaki Touko would've been able to provide a solution. Alas, it's too late for me now. To put it more simply, an Origin signifies our instincts. It lies within every single one of us, but they can take different forms depending on the person. While some can have a completely harmless Origin, there also exist those like me that possess something special. Unfortunately for me, Araya deemed that those instincts of mine were suited for his schemes."

He took a deep breath before he continued. Even under the frosted sky, beads of sweat began to form on his forehead. The atmosphere began to shift to one of an unknown

looming danger. Despite knowing that something terrible awaited me if I stayed any longer, I couldn't bring myself to run away.

"Are you okay, Lio? You're acting strange."

"There's no need to worry. I'm used to this," he said in an unsteady voice. He took several long, shallow breaths before continuing to speak.

"This is the important part. When instincts are brought to the forefront of a personality—to the surface of a consciousness—they possess the power to override the rational mind. The personality I've built up over the years has no means of resisting it—after all, those instincts are my Origin. A vessel cultivated over a mere twenty years will eventually begin to overflow. Araya once told me that those who have awakened their Origin will forever be bound by it. I doubt you'll ever understand, Kokutou. You see, the Origin that was awakened inside of me was that of Consumption."

He began to chuckle as he spoke. His breathing had gotten so laboured that it became hard to look at. He desperately gripped his hand tight in order to hold back the nausea. His body was trembling so vigorously I could hear his teeth clattering together.

"Lio, you need to..."

"Please, just let me finish. This might be the last chance we ever get to have a proper conversation. When those instincts surface, they also bring a slight change to the physical body. Of course, I don't mean in terms of appearance. Instead, it's the internal makeup of our bodies that changes. Apparently, it's some sort of return to our original forms. The point is, people don't even realise it's happening until it's over."

As the smile vanished from his face, he moved his hand away from his chest. Then, he covered his face with the palm of his hand. His slouched back heaved like that of an asthma patient every time he laughed. His hushed laughter had the same frailness as that of someone on laughing gas. I couldn't bear to watch any longer.

"Haha. Well, that's how it is. Before I knew it, I ended up becoming something else. An Origin is but an impulse. When it takes over, I cease to be myself. All I can do is leave myself to it and feast. Damn it all! Do you understand, Mikiya?! Do you understand what it means to have this as your Origin?! Why?! Why does this goddamn thing have to be at the root of my being?! Why do I have to stand by and watch this insignificant Origin wipe my very existence away?! I won't let that happen—I swear I won't. I refuse to be erased for the sake of something so meaningless. I want to die—while I'm still me."

As his teeth creaked together, he began to move away from the table. His eyes were damp with tears, while his shoulders were heaving violently. He was doing everything he could to keep his violent urges in check.

"Please, let's go and ask Ms. Touko for help. She might be able to do something about this."

With his knees resting against the floor, he shook his head in rejection.

"I can't do that. Because I'm... special."

He raised his gaze, his spasms growing more violent with every passing moment. For some reason, however, the expression on his face was that of peace.

"I knew it. You really are kind. You've always been like this. You're the only one who has always been on my side. The only reason why I've barely been able to hold on to my sanity is you. Yeah. The truth is, I *really* don't want to kill you."

He clung to my feet with his arm. His grip was so strong that I thought he would break my leg. Still, I wasn't the slightest bit afraid. The strength he clung to me with was proportional to the size of his despair. I could never bring myself to reject that.

"Lio... please."

All I could do was stand there and watch, unable to do a single thing. He just continued clinging to my coat while on his knees, dropping his gaze to the floor. His spasms continued to grow even fiercer, as if his body was about to split into two. Suddenly, he let out a whisper.

"I'm... a murderer."

A meagre penitence, said as he struggled to find the right words.

"Yes, you are."

I gazed outside the window and into the ocean as I answered.

"I'm... not a normal human being."

A meagre admonishment, said as he tried to stop himself from retching.

"Please, don't say such things."

I gazed outside the window and into the ocean as I answered.

"I'm... beyond saving."

A meagre confession, said as he fought to hold the tears back.

"Everyone has a chance, as long as they still live."

Even as I answered, all I could was gaze outside the window and into the ocean.

...

Words in place of tears, and inconsequential answers to reciprocate them. I'll never know if I was able to relieve his burden in even the slightest. Still, in the end, he mustered up one last silent, desperate plea.

"Please... help me, Kokutou."

I couldn't provide an answer to those words. In that moment, all I could do was curse myself for being so powerless.

"Ah...gh..."

He groaned in a tone higher than earlier, and the next thing I knew, I'd been blown back to the wall by the force of his single arm. After my back crashed into the wall vigorously, I shifted my gaze back toward him. He was simply staring at me with bloodshot eyes.

"Don't try to look for me. I'll kill you the next time we meet."

He climbed on top of the table as he declared so in a quiet voice. The next instant, I heard the window break.

"Please, come and go see Ms. Touko with me! I'm sure you'll..."

"You're sure I'll be what? No one even knows whether I can be cured. Besides, even if things went back to how they were, I wouldn't have a life worth living. I'd only end up getting tried for murder. If that's the other option, I might as well see how far I can go. I have Ryougi Shiki to deal with too. I need to get as far away from her as I can!"

He had a smile on his face as he jumped out the window, his golden hair fluttering in the air. I quickly rushed toward the window, but I couldn't even find his shadow anywhere near the harbour anymore.

"Why did you have to do something so foolish?"

That was all I could mutter as I finally regained my cool. Such actions would never solve any of the problems plaguing us. Just as Shirazumi Lio had no way out of the situation, Kokutou Mikiya was in the exact same predicament. Biting down on my lips as I deplored my own uselessness, I left the room filled with empty husks of Shiki.

Even without a clear way out in sight, there were still things I needed to do. I had to find Shiki and do something about Lio. I swore I'd keep going, even if there was no salvation awaiting any of us in the end. For Lio's own sake too, I had to stop him before he could commit another murder.

Murder Speculation / 4

■

August.

I haven't gotten a single wink of sleep since that day. I've been too afraid to even set foot outside. I can't look at the mirror, because all I'd see is the face of someone brazenly living on without a care in the world. I am a terrible human being. I don't feel the drive to do anything, let alone eat. Even though I don't have a single wound on my body, I go about my life like a walking corpse. Everything finally clicked on the seventh day. It wasn't only him that died on that day. Why hadn't anyone told me any sooner? It took so long for me to realise such a simple truth—that killing someone also meant killing myself.

■

When I got back to my room, the sun was no longer anywhere to be seen. It'd been two days since I'd gone back home. Needless to say, I was the only one there.

Sprawled out on my table was a map of the entire town and a half-empty mug of coffee. Within this isolated room, both Shiki and the remnants she left had already faded away.

"..."

I found myself reflexively breathing a sigh. The truth was that I'd been harbouring a faint hope. Perhaps as soon as I got back, Shiki would be right there hogging my bed and sleeping as if nothing had even happened. Ever since November of last year, Shiki'd been occasionally showing up for no reason but to sleep. I had no idea why, or what she was trying to accomplish. One day, I decided to ask Akitaka for help, worried if that was some roundabout way for her to express her frustrations toward me. Even when I told him about Shiki's incoherent actions, all he did was tell me not to give up on her. It seemed like he also needed to air out his dissatisfaction.

Looking back at it now, those days were nothing but peaceful. I'd never even doubted that they might come to an end so abruptly.

I heard my phone ring. Perhaps Ms. Touko had called to pick on me; I was taking three days in a row off work, after all.

"Kokutou speaking," I hesitantly said after picking up the phone.

I heard a gasp from the other end of the call. For some unknown reason, I immediately realised that it was her.

"Shiki..."

"You... idiot."

In a tense voice, she immediately began to berate me. Even just by hearing her voice, I could tell that she was genuinely quivering with anger.

"Where the hell have you been since yesterday, you dumbass! You know it's dangerous out there, right?! Haven't you seen the news?!"

She then went silent. Of course I'd seen the news. It's why I couldn't afford to waste any time cooped up in my room, precisely because I knew what was going on out there.

"Whatever. If you're safe, then that's all that matters. You should stay with Touko for the meantime. That's all I have to say."

Apparently, she'd been calling since last night in order to tell me that. I was glad that she actually cared about my safety, but at the same time, those feelings of hers made me needlessly apprehensive. Even though we'd found out who was behind the serial killings, Shiki still hadn't come home.

"Hold on. What have you been up to?"

"That's none of your business."

"Except it is. You're going after the culprit, right?"

"Yeah."

After a brief silence, she responded in affirmation. Her voice was cold, so devoid of emotion that it made me tremble. All I could sense from it was pure bloodlust. Was she intending to kill the culprit—to kill Lio with her own hands?

"You need to stop, Shiki. Come home. You shouldn't... you mustn't kill him."

"Hm? So you met with Shirazumi, huh? Heh, how interesting. You just gave me one more reason why I can't let that bastard go."

In contrast to her frigid tone a mere moment ago, Shiki was now chuckling with glee.

"Shiki!"

"Not happening. Even I can barely hold myself back at this point. I have no intention of letting my prey escape. It's been a while since I last got to hunt someone like him."

Last summer, Asagami Fujino committed a series of murders for nothing but her own pleasure. Could someone who was only taking lives against his will like Lio really be lumped together with her? Unfortunately, the answer was yes. No matter what their motive may have been, they were taking human lives out of an impulse born from within themselves. Those were precisely the people that society decried as bloodthirsty monsters.

"Even then, Shiki. We humans must never take the life of another person, no matter how grave their sins may be."

"I don't give a shit about those commonplace beliefs of yours, Kokutou. Shirazumi Lio is no longer a normal human being—he's taken far too many lives for that. That's why he deserves to be killed."

"There's no such thing as a person that deserves to be killed."

"Don't be stupid. It's too late for him. He'll never become human again," she declared staunchly.

Perhaps she was right. Perhaps he was too far gone to be called human anymore. Still, I couldn't let that happen. He told me he wanted to stay as he was, to stay human.

"It's not too late. How is he any different from us? Anyway, just come home already, Shiki. Just remember, I'll never forgive you if you kill him."

A brief silence continued.

"No. I can't do that."

After sinking into thought for a while, she expressed her rejection.

"Why?"

"Because I'm the same as him... a bloodthirsty monster," she said after a fleeting moment of hesitation.

In that instant, my head went blank. That was how much I couldn't bring myself to accept the confession she had just uttered.

"No, you aren't. You've never even killed anyone."

"Only because of coincidence. But I'll never change. I finally understand, Mikiya. Four years ago, I came close to committing murder. It was because SHIKI was a personality who knew nothing but that. In the end, that was all it was, though. Murder was all he knew, but that didn't mean he enjoyed taking human lives.

If I'd just stopped to think about it, I would've realised much sooner. When I woke up and SHIKI disappeared, I still thirsted for the act of murder even though I was alone now. Why was that? The answer's obvious. It was because it wasn't him that longed to kill. It was the personality that survived, Shiki, who craved murder all along."

The voice I heard from the other side of the phone was downcast. A crestfallen tone, as though she were cursing her own self. Even though it was undoubtedly Shiki's voice, I couldn't recognize it as such.

"That's why I can't stop. I can't go back to you, so you should just give up on waiting for me, okay?"

She attempted to mask her feelings in a bashful tone. To me, it sounded like the voice of someone silently shedding tears. I fell silent. My anger couldn’t be held back any longer.

"Listen up, Shiki. That's just a fundamental misunderstanding on your part."

She didn't reply, but that didn't deter me. I simply continued speaking.

"You told me before, didn't you? We can only shoulder the burden of one person's death. I know how important those words are to you, and I know that you understand the pain of murder better than anyone else."

Indeed. Ever since she was a child, she had been killing a fundamental part of herself, SHIKI. She was both SHIKI, the victim, and Shiki, the perpetrator. There was no way she didn't know how sad the act of murder was. That was why I would always believe. In the wounded, sad Shiki I knew.

"You won't end up killing anyone. You think it's a coincidence that it hasn't happened yet? Don't make me laugh. How lucky can you get? You've held it back all this time out of your own will. We all have our own interests, don't we? It just so happened that yours had to be murder. That's it. Even then, you've fought against it your entire life. You'll be able to hold on for as long as you need to, I promise."

I heard the sound of her biting her lip. The next instant, she began to tear into me as though she were lashing out.

"Promise? Cut the crap. How can you guarantee something that I don't even know?"

I'd known the answer to that question since long ago.

"Because you're so kind."

The look on her face when she couldn't kill me three years ago had been seared into my memories since that day. She didn't have anything to say in response. Since we were talking on the phone, I had no way of telling what sort of expression she had in that moment. In this conversation of ours, our voices were everything we had.

In the end, even that wasn't enough to dissuade her.

"You never change, Kokutou. I told you before, didn't I? Shiki absolutely loathes that part of you."

Those were all she had to say before she ended the call. All that was left to hear on my phone was the periodic beeping. Those final words of hers, they held the same meaning as the words she gave me at the end of last summer, on a certain rainy day.

◇

The clock now read seven in the evening, February 10. Her once hatred had now progressed into a sense of loathing. With that fact driving me, I prepared to head out once more, forgetting that I hadn't properly slept for three days at this point.

/ 3

▪

August.

I'm starting to go mad.

▪

Because you're so kind.

Recalling those trivial words, I quickened my steps. A surge of violent emotions overwhelmed me, leaving me truly irritated.

"Lucky bastard," I snarled, mentally pummeling his oblivious face.

He hadn't changed. Not one bit. Despite knowing Ryougi Shiki, the killer, he dared to flash that idiotic smile at me. Oblivious to the threat of death, his insistence on treating me normally made me harbour unwanted fantasies. Yes, the fantasy that Ryougi Shiki could thrive in a world of sunshine.

Back then, that feeling had left Shiki filled with loathing. Now, I understood. I'd only end up killing him. That's why I had to flee. To escape the self-loathing that would consume me.

...Pathetic. I was just the same as I used to be. What right did I have to judge him? Nothing had changed from before. Kokutou Mikiya was still just a bothersome nuisance to Shiki, just as he'd always been.

Two hours after calling Mikiya, I stood before Shirazumi Lio's den. Tracking him was child's play. The reeking trail of cannabis led me straight to its source: a harborside cargo warehouse. This, apparently, was the monster's lair.

Desolation reigned in the harbour. No late-night revellers dared venture into the sprawling expanse of warehouses past nine, and no residents inhabited the area. Only the sea's dark reflection and the harsh glare of streetlamps punctuated the night.

Perfect. No chance of interruption here.

Knife gripped in my left hand, throwing dagger in my right, I approached my destination. Its size rivalled a school gymnasium, more akin to a factory than a storage facility. Towering at seven metres tall, it defied expectations with walls entirely composed of windows. While the five-metre height obscured the interior, daylight must've flooded the space. Essentially, a vinyl greenhouse encased within iron walls.

Scaling the window crossed my mind, but it proved unnecessary. The entrance, a large, rusty iron door, hung slightly ajar. An amateurish trap. Exasperated, I slipped through the gap.

Inside, an unexpected scene unfolded, a stark contrast to the harbour's bleakness. Moonlight streamed through skylight-like windows, illuminating... a jungle. Five-metre-tall grass filled the warehouse floor, soil dominating the landscape with only concrete pathways for navigation. An artificial tropical garden. That was the true nature of this warehouse.

"..."

Speechless, the dagger in my hand twitched. He was hiding in that jungle, watching. The urge to indulge his little game gnawed at me, but it was a losing battle. My conversation with Kokutou Mikiya had left me fuming, my usual composure shattered. I charged through the undergrowth, my prey in sight.

"Gh!"

He bolted, startled, but it was too late. I closed the distance, the knife in my left hand arching downwards in a deadly strike. At the last moment, he sprang upwards, aiming for the wall just as he did last night. Unlike a bird or spider, my human form lacked the dexterity for such three-dimensional manoeuvres. I was getting tired of all his little tricks. I hurled the dagger at the wall-clinging foe, sending him crashing to the ground. I lunged forward, pinning him beneath me.

"Wha..."

Shirazumi Lio gaped up at me. The man I'd considered my equal last night was utterly bewildered by this one-sided affair. The man who mirrored me remained silent, his gaze locked on the descending blade. No longer the monster from the night before, he was merely a harmless 'human,' as Mikiya had claimed.

"P-Please, wait," he pleaded, his words devoid of meaning.

I ignored his plea, the knife poised to strike.

Then, a strange sense of familiarity halted my hand.

"...Huh?"

Surprise echoed in both of our voices. I stared, disbelieving, at the knife frozen a hair's breadth from his throat.

"Wha..."

Confusion clouded my features. Unconsciously, I tightened my grip on the weapon in my left hand. Escape was out of the question. This was it. I'd kill him, and become a monster myself. Then, maybe, just maybe, I could carve out a solitary existence. Even if I couldn't go back, I could live a life devoid of pain, a life dictated by my own desires.

But... my left hand. It simply wouldn't obey. It refused to extinguish the life of Shirazumi Lio. An echo reverberated in my mind: *...forgive you.*

Like a wounded serpent, he slithered away, his back wide open. The lines of death were stark and undeniable. All it would take was a flick of my wrist, a familiar motion.

I'll never forgive you.

And so, I let my final chance slip away. What a fool I was. Despite craving the kill, I couldn't bring myself to cross that final line. All because of that man's meaningless words.

"Those were just empty words!"

Yes, they didn't matter. I didn't care if no one forgave me. The entire world could condemn me, and I wouldn't blink. So why? A bitter accusation escaped my lips.

"...It's all his fault."

The prey, having escaped my grasp, burst into laughter. The monster that had trembled before me moments ago had moulted back into the nightmare I'd faced the night before, sensing my weakness. I was powerless to end Shirazumi Lio's life, no matter how desperately I tried. Now that the monster had reemerged, I was completely powerless to run away, let alone defeat him.

/ 4

▪

August.

I was right all along, just as Araya said. Killing is as natural as breathing for a madman like me.

▪

Rain lashed down, the relentless drumming forced me to pry open my eyelids.

"...So, I live," I thought to myself.

Waking on the cold concrete, I surveyed the scene. Lush greenery surrounded me, plants twice my height or more. Though the rain muted the sunlight filtering through the high windows, the light was so intense that it felt like I was outdoors. It appeared to be morning outside. A desolate, gray botanical garden. And I lay sprawled within it.

My memory was fuzzy, but it seems I was done in by Shirazumi Lio. My hands were bound, and my whole body felt numb and weak, as if injected with some strange drug. My mind swam, unable to grasp anything concrete. Handcuffed, I lay on the unforgiving floor, eyes open yet unseeing.

The biting cold seeped in, the only sound the incessant patter of rain on the windows. Lost in thought, I watched the icy winter drizzle streak down the window panes. Perhaps the drug coursing through my veins was to blame. My mind drifted, unmoored from the present, and was lost in the hazy recollections of three years past.

...

Rain lashed down, a biting cold seeping into her bones. Shiki, heedless of an umbrella, chased after Kokutou Mikiya. Guided by the dim glow of streetlights, she ran through the downpour, the wet asphalt reflecting the light and obscuring his figure. Undeterred, she

quickly caught up to him. Earlier, she'd been thwarted by a stranger's interference, but now, she was alone.

Shiki lunged, her knife aimed at the motionless Mikiya. A crimson stain bloomed on the wet pavement as his blood mingled with the rainwater. But the blade had merely grazed him. Gasping in disbelief, Shiki watched as he fled. Relentlessly, she pursued him, the deadly pattern repeating itself. A persistent game of cat and mouse.

Strangely, the boy would stop running after a while, lingering as if waiting for her. Yet, bathed in the relentless rain, Shiki found herself paralyzed, unable to strike the final blow.

"Why...?!" she screamed, clutching her head.

From a distance, he paused, a solitary figure in the rain. As Shiki watched him, a suffocating tightness constricted her chest.

"Being around you brings me nothing but torment, Kokutou. You dangle before me a vision of something I can never possess, driving me to the brink of instability. That's why... I have to eliminate you. With you gone, the dreams will vanish too. I'll purge myself of these painful dreams and return to who I once was!"

Her screams echoed like a child's tantrum. Yet, her sorrow only intensified, threatening to erupt. Standing under the downpour, Shiki seemed on the verge of tears. Mikiya stopped his flight, turning to face her. Words failed him. Yet, there he stood, a clumsy, awkward figure, patiently waiting.

In that moment, Shiki grasped SHIKI's will. Killing Mikiya would break the cycle of suffering, allowing her to reclaim her former self. But it would also sever the dreams they shared. Dreaming was a constant torment, but a life devoid of dreams would only be empty. Neither the cloaked figure nor Shiki herself ultimately held back the final blow. It was SHIKI, the one who cherished dreams above all else, who refused to shatter the dream embodied in Mikiya.

Even if it was an impossible dream, even if it caused endless pain and agony, dreams held a value that couldn't be denied. They were a reason to live. Therefore, she couldn't erase him. The act would only deepen her suffering. But the pain threatened to consume her.

If so… Shiki approached Mikiya. The girl paused on the crosswalk, a short distance away. Rain blurred her vision as the distant sound of a car grew louder. Finally, she smiled. Yes, the answer was simple.

"If I can't erase you, then I'll just have to be the one to vanish instead."

A soft, happy, and ephemeral smile spread across her face. The next moment, a car screeched to a halt, sending her flying.

...

That was the memory I had of that day three years ago. Back then, I was the one truly facing death. It was SHIKI, the dormant part of me, who should have awakened as Ryougi Shiki. But he sacrificed himself, dying in my place. He wouldn't have been able to protect his own dream otherwise.

If SHIKI had remained, he would've continued the indiscriminate killing. So, it was Shiki, not SHIKI, who could make his dream a reality. SHIKI, existing as the other side of me, could only ever sleep.

We were both born from the same original personality. But it was I, Shiki, who held dominion over the body, claiming the name Ryougi Shiki. As long as I existed, SHIKI remained asleep, forever trapped in slumber. Bound by my repressed desires, he was compelled to deny, harm and kill others. That was his reason for existence–a bloodthirsty monster by nature. SHIKI would only manifest as Ryougi Shiki when harbouring murderous intent.

However, much like me now, he too yearned for a normal life. It made sense. We shared hobbies, grew up together, and even our aspirations were the same. I, the affirming Shiki, could at least pretend. But SHIKI couldn't. Despite his loathing for others, SHIKI yearned for companionship. A dream eternally out of reach. Thus, his sole wish became my happiness, for Shiki to live happily. SHIKI loved to dream. After all, his desires could only be fulfilled within their confines. His deepest desire, then, became Shiki's as well.

We stumbled upon that dream in reality: that life of happiness. A wish that also negated his own existence. The classmate SHIKI liked. Shiki would've been able to realize that dream of his. But as long as SHIKI existed, it would inevitably be extinguished by his very own hands. He couldn't bear the thought. He couldn't destroy the dream Kokutou Mikiya represented, the dream of Shiki's happiness. So, he made the only choice he could. He chose to safeguard his own dream above anything else.

Now that I finally possessed his happiness, I would cherish that dream of his forever.

"At the very least... I wanted Mikiya to remember SHIKI. For my present self is a manifestation of his dream."

That explained my unconscious use of SHIKI's voice. It was a subconscious attempt to be perceived as him by those around me. The rain refused to subside. My consciousness remained clouded, my vision blurring as an irresistible drowsiness washed over me. Before succumbing, I recalled Shiki's final wish, the other half of my being. And with that, I made a choice: to forget.

Thank you. After all, I wouldn't be able to kill you anyway.

A tinge of sadness lingered. SHIKI, who could only connect with others through violence, could never utter these words to the person he truly desired to reach.

Murder Speculation / 5

▪

That won't be enough to set my mind at ease. I'm too afraid to be all alone. I need someone who possesses the same madness by my side.

▪

February 11, Thursday. It'd been raining ceaselessly since the early morning, and that continued to hold true even as I went to pay Ms. Touko a visit. I wasn't there because I was ready to get back to work, however. There was something I needed to ask her about before I went back to the harbour. She nodded along disinterestedly as I briefed her on Lio's situation.

"What do you think?"

As I glared at her in frustration toward her apathetic responses, she removed her glasses and met my gaze with her own scowl.

"What I think doesn't matter. If his Origin was awakened four years ago, then it's too late for him. He's probably become a different being altogether at this point."

Placing a cigarette in her mouth, she pressed a hand onto her cheek and sunk into thought.

"Gotta say, I wasn't expecting this. Araya really had to go and leave us such a useless parting gift. Awakening the Origin of an amateur is a surefire way to eradicate their personality. In that sense, Shirazumi Lio's fractured behaviour is nothing out of the ordinary."

"Could you tell me a bit more about this Origin thing? I was told it was some sort of instinct, but I don't see how such a thing can overwrite a person's own will."

As I posed my question, she moved the cigarette from her mouth down to her finger.

"No matter how deep it may be, a person's subconscious will never be able to alter their physical body so dramatically. Whether that goes for me or for you, a consciousness fostered over a couple decades will never be able to oppose the more powerful self that we know as our physical bodies. If the brain's role is to preside over our personalities, then our bodies are the representation of our individuality. Some people these days seem to believe

that we humans can live as mere brains, but that's just disrespecting the concept of a personality in the first place. Well, I suppose that isn't relevant right now."

Apparently, we'd gone a bit off course. She paused to gather her thoughts for a moment, and then posed another odd question.

"Kokutou, do you believe in past lives?"

"You mean like, living as an animal before being born as a human? Hm, I suppose it'd be a maybe. While I can't deny it, it's not like I approve of it either."

"I couldn't think of an answer more befitting of you. Well, for the sake of discussion, let's hypothesise that they do exist. Even when speaking scientifically, there are grounds for believing in reincarnation. Every particle that exists in the universe eventually changes forms, right? So long as you don't factor in concepts like our minds and souls, everything will eventually be reincarnated as something else.

An Origin is a means of retracing that orderless rule. There are some mages who allow themselves to be possessed by their past lives in order to use their abilities. Basically, it's an attempt to bring the abilities you possessed before being born into the present. An Origin is a similar concept, but it exists on an even higher plane than that. If we possessed lives before our current ones, then it'd only make sense for that life to also have one previous to it. Even if you weren't born as a human in your past life, and even if you weren't a living being in the life before that, there lies a thread of existence that ties it all together. For every one of us, there exists a beginning of our souls—a birthplace of our existences. However, the concept of living beings does not exist there.

All that exists is a genesis, a direction for causality to move in. Within the fount where all originates, an orientation toward something is born in a flash of lightning. That prerogative toward a certain something begins to flow, eventually taking a form suitable to it. Sometimes, it just so happens to be the form of a human being. Perhaps you could call it a driving force that emerged at the beginning of all things. It's an inescapable impulse to accomplish something born from within the chaos of the Fount of Origination. An absolute imperative for all that have been given form to fulfil their purpose. That impulse is what we mages refer to as an Origin.

Well, put simply, I guess calling it an instinct would be good enough. You know how some people are only attracted to children? They say stuff like that is caused by a traumatic instance in a person's childhood, but nothing that happened to a kid would be able to affect an adult's consciousness like that. People like that have been that way since before they were born. Our souls are bound by the rigid shapes of our Origin. Even if we're aware of it, we cannot oppose the courses set for us during the foundation of our existence."

That thing she said at the end sounded a bit too extreme. Regardless, there were also some parts that indubitably made sense. We humans engage in actions that we don't want to because we're unable to keep our urges in check. For all things, be it plants or minerals, our lives are bound by a predetermined direction.

"Most people live their entire lives unaware of their Origins, though. However, there are people who are born a bit too close to their Origins. Just like people with psychic powers, they possess extraordinary abilities, and as a result tend to be outcasts of society. By the

way, Shiki constantly seeks death because her Origin is Emptiness, and the reason why Azaka refuses to be bound by rules is because hers is Taboo. Shiki's being driven by that impulse because she's too close, but Azaka's pretty much a normal girl, right? An Origin is only a cause, meaning it isn't ordinarily something that rules over an individual. Unless you become aware of it for whatever reason, that is."

She glanced at me with a keen look in her eyes. I'd already understood what she was trying to say.

"In other words, you lose the ability to go in a different direction once you realise your own Origin?"

"Exactly. An Origin is a current that has surged since the beginning of existence. The mere seventeen years that Shirazumi Lio possesses will only end up getting swept away. All he can do is surrender himself to that impulse over and over again. Consumption, huh? That's quite an unusual impulse he has. I'm not surprised that Araya wanted to keep a close eye on him.

Listen, Kokutou. If that's what his Origin is, then his past life was probably a creature that feasted on everything it could get its hands on. Those who have awakened their Origins will gain the past lives they have accumulated. He can't be considered a single human anymore —he's an entire pack of beasts. Things haven't taken a turn for the worse because his original personality is still holding on, but once that's gone, that pack of beasts is all that will remain. Well, that'd also be quite the interesting sight," she said with a sarcastic grin on her face.

Her indifference wasn't anything new to me, but I couldn't let that statement slide.

"Things only ended up like this because of the mage that awakened his Origin, right? This would've never happened if he were..."

"Are you sure about that? Awakening someone else's Origin is not something a mage can do on their own. An Origin can only be brought to the forefront once the person in question becomes aware of it. In other words, it's a hidden spell that can only be carried out with the consent of both parties. Shirazumi Lio chose this path at his own volition. He himself chose to become a beast, and he himself decided to kill all of those people. The lives he has taken will never come back. It's too late for him, even if you somehow managed to bring him back to normal. He told you that he couldn't hold himself back, but that isn't true.

You seem to be quite intent on taking his side, so consider this a warning. It's true that those who have awakened their Origins will end up losing their sense of self. However, that doesn't mean their personality will be divided into two. If his will still remains, then he should be perfectly capable of holding his impulses back. It's impossible for him to be switching around like some sort of split personality. He made the choice to eat those people out of his own free will, Kokutou. It'd be foolish of you to continue viewing him as the person you once knew. All he's doing is deceiving you in a bid to earn your sympathy."

She threw a fierce look my way, like that of a teacher scolding a student who was risking their life in jest. I felt just a tiny bit of my anger toward her fading. After all, I knew how unusual it was for her to be concerned about someone. After seeing my unconvinced expression, she scowled at me in bewilderment.

"Aren't you surprised, Kokutou? I just told you that he isn't feasting on other people because he couldn't hold his impulses back, you know."

"Huh? No, of course I'm shocked."

She listlessly furrowed her brow upon hearing my calm response.

"That means even you can't save him, right?"

"Mhm. That ability is something Araya gained as a result of endlessly attempting to reach the Fount by chasing after the soul. My specialty lies in the physical body. Dealing with human souls is completely out of my wheelhouse."

"I see. But if his personality is still there, then can't you at least do something about it?"

"Well, the best I can do is soothe him, I suppose. Still, it's not like that'll be of any help. The fact that his personality is still intact should be considered a miracle. He might not even last another day, and it's completely possible that he's already given up on being human for a long time now."

Even if that were the case, I couldn't just abandon him. Even if he stopped being Shirazumi Lio long ago, the fact that he asked me to help him was an undeniable truth.

"God, you're way too easy to read. I won't stop you, but just remember you're dealing with a murderous freak here. You really should just leave dealing with all this to Shiki. She's been going after him so that she can finally close the curtain on the case from four years ago, right?"

I dropped my gaze down. To settle the score from four years ago. As much as I wished that it were that simple, she was clearly acting strange when we spoke on the phone. I'd already lost Shiki before my eyes once in the past. The Shiki I spoke to the night before reminded me of the Shiki from that fateful day. Nothing had changed from four years ago. A bloodthirsty monster appears, and Shiki declares herself to be the same. Back then, she also began to lean toward that side. I found myself questioning what she wanted to accomplish by taking someone else's life.

"What reason could there possibly be for someone to commit murder?"

I couldn't stop myself from posing that question. She leaned her back onto her chair before answering.

"People commit murder when their feelings toward a certain person begin to exceed the amount that their selves can handle. We all have a limit to the sum of emotions that we can contain within us. For some, that limit is larger, and for some, that limit is remarkably small. Be it love or hatred, once those feelings begin to overflow, they soon become too painful to bear. When that happens, we become unable to permit the very existence of that person.

Now, what can we do about that? Our only option is to do away with them by some form or means. We can either distance them from ourselves by leaving them or choosing to forget them. The most extreme application of those options is murder. It's an act of self-defence, so any sense of morality vanishes. If anything, you even gain a transient sense of righteousness."

When someone has too much anger to contain, they then resort to murder not to take revenge, but in order to protect themselves from those feelings. In other words, an unbearable amount of anguish is what leads someone to murder.

"But there are people who commit murder for no reason in particular."

"That isn't murder they're committing. They're engaging in the act of slaughter. Murder is when someone puts each other's dignity and pasts onto a scale and decides which one to erase. People that commit murder shoulder the sins and significance of their actions. However, slaughter is different. The victim may be human, but the culprit holds no such dignity. There's no significance, or sin that they're able to shoulder. It's not like a mere accident is capable of bearing the weight of a sin, right?"

To kill another person meant killing yourself at the same time.

"Then what about those bloodthirsty monsters?"

"It's exactly as it sounds. They're monsters that thirst for blood, no different from a natural disaster. The only thing their victims can do is curse their own bad luck."

Shiki once said something along those lines before. Ten days ago, on that night before we split up. When she saw the news, she said that the serial killer wasn't committing murder.

"We humans can only kill once in our lifetime," she'd said.

"We can only shoulder the burden of one person's death," I responded.

"I... finally remembered."

Those two phrases meant the same thing. After all, those were words that came from her grandfather's will. Even though Shiki had been abiding by those words all this time, she was now trying to go against them. The fault falls on both me and Lio for driving her to that extent. I had no way of knowing what feelings Shiki harboured toward me.

Regardless, the truth was that those emotions tormented her, and they pushed her to the point that she had no choice but to murder me. Shiki understood the pain of murder, which was precisely why she couldn't kill anyone. Perhaps that was why she wanted to become the same as Lio—so that she wouldn't have to shoulder any of the significance and pain behind it. It just so happened that a bloodthirsty monster happened to be lurking in her surroundings. After all, he had been longing to find another one of his own kind for years now.

"Thanks for answering my questions."

I stood up and prepared to leave. She frowned in dissatisfaction.

"What, done already? It's raining outside. You might as well stay a little longer."

"Sorry, but I need to go."

I bowed my head and started walking. As I hurriedly made my way out...

"I suppose it'd be crude of me to try and stop you. Goodbye, Kokutou. I'll see you tomorrow, if fate so wills it."

I heard someone bidding their farewells behind me.

/ 5

...

I had a nostalgic dream.

"Everyone kills a person at least once in their lifetime."

Really?

"Yes, that's right. We have the right to take a life once, but only to end our own journey."

Our own?

"Indeed. A person can only carry the weight of one life. That's why we respect death. It allows us to forgive those who couldn't finish their journeys. All lives hold equal value, you see. The fact that it's yours does not mean it belongs solely to you.

Then what about you, Grandpa?

"It's too late for me, Shiki. I've taken many lives. Now, I carry the burden of their deaths, and can't carry my own. My death will drift to an empty place, unclaimed and alone. Only a fate of true solitude awaits me now."

Only once?

"That's right. Killing beyond that becomes meaningless. That single death is precious. Those who use their right and kill another forfeit their own chance at a human death. They become trapped, unable to truly die."

Does it hurt, Grandpa?

"Yes. This is farewell, Shiki. Forever. I truly hope you find a peaceful death."

Grandpa? Hey, Grandpa! What's wrong? Why do you have to die with such a lonely look on your face? Grandpa... hey!

...

A sickening *squelch*. Unlike the rhythmic drumming of rain on the roof, this sound was thick and repulsive.

Blinking my eyes open, I emerged from the dreamscape. I lay sprawled in the grass-strewn warehouse, wrists bound and tossed onto the cold concrete. The situation had hardly changed. The sluggishness in my limbs was slowly receding, and a man who mirrored my features stood before me.

Shirazumi... Lio. From my prone position, I confirmed his identity. A twisted, malicious grin stretched across his face as he crouched low. A syringe glinted in his grasp.

"Awake already, Princess? You're quite the eager one," he sneered. "Seems the drugs weren't enough. Should've used this from the beginning."

He yanked my arm and plunged the needle deep. Numbness crept in, eclipsing any pain. Paralyzed and chained, I could only glare at him with impotent fury.

"Good. That fiery gaze," he hissed. "That's the Ryougi I remember. Don't worry, it's just a muscle relaxant. Need you nice and still for a while."

Lio settled on the floor, his gaze roving over my body like a predator. My eyes were fixed on the rain-streaked window.

"...Been a long three years," he muttered. “I hope you understand the emotions I've been harbouring all this time."

I couldn't bring myself to care, but as if sensing my detachment, he continued his monologue.

"Araya called me a failure. Said it was a mistake because we were opposites. But how can we be opposites, Ryougi? We're cut from the same cloth. You know you're an outcast. Don't we belong together?"

I offered no reply. It wasn't that I was ignoring him; my mind was simply elsewhere, on someone else completely. He droned on regardless.

"After you had that... accident," he said bitterly, "Araya sidelined me. He said that he didn't need me anymore because those two would be enough to handle your shattering. He used me, then discarded me like yesterday's trash. Disgusting, isn't it? But I couldn't defy him. So I kept my distance.

But no need to be so glum. I’ve never forgotten about you for a second. See, I knew it. Araya couldn't finish you. It takes a mind as twisted as mine to truly possess you. Ah, I knew this day would come."

He scurried closer, dropping to his hands and knees like a famished dog. A wet, sickening sound filled the air as he pressed his lips to my feet. A slimy sensation slithered up my ankle, a rough tongue probing its way further.

"..."

I remained mute. The only sound in the desolate warehouse was his ragged breathing. My body was rendered immobile, but my senses were heightened. I was drenched in sweat, as if trapped in a tropical night. My clothes clung to me, heavy with the dampness.

"..."

The hem of my kimono was ripped open at the ankle. Lio, lost in his depravity, panted heavily. His saliva-slicked tongue slowly ascended, tracing a path from my knee. It meandered inwards, meticulously cleaning the expanse of my thigh. The repugnant squelch became a maddening refrain. The sticky liquid smeared across my skin, filling me with revulsion.

"..."

I shut out the sound. The leech clinging to me, a dull ache throbbing in my depleted body, continued its ascent from my leg up to my waist. Its tongue, without disturbing the hem of my kimono, slithered over the fabric.

Squelch. Glop.

The sticky sound was simply repulsive. Saliva dripped relentlessly, soaking through the fabric and chilling my skin. My handcuffed arms ached. The beast's tongue traced a grotesque path across my chest, its journey culminating at my throat. In a single, repugnant sweep, it lapped from my cheek to my eye. Its ragged gasps were a constant reminder of its proximity. The combined stench of its breath and my own saliva-slick skin made me want to retch.

"Filthy dog," I spat out.

It responded with a gleeful laugh before sinking its teeth into my neck.

"Ah!"

The drug-heightened sensation was excruciating. Agony lanced through me, a searing pain that echoed as if a blade had pierced my skull. Seemingly satiated, Lio pulled away, leaving a beast’s teeth marks etched on my neck. Even the sensation of blood and slime trickling down my skin felt perverse.

"Not yet, not yet," it muttered, rising to its feet. "I can't consume you yet. You haven't become the same monster you once were. Shirazumi Lio cherishes you dearly, and will treat you accordingly. You see, Consumption is my Origin. Whenever that urge took hold, I devoured those around me without a second thought. But here he stands, defying his own nature. Shirazumi Lio persists. I haven’t succumbed to that urge. And it's all thanks to you, my friend, that I was able to permit his existence." As if in a desperate bid to outrun his own desires, Shirazumi Lio retreated. "And yet! You couldn't finish me last night either! You haven't truly killed anyone. Not even against someone like Araya could you manage it. You, a far greater monster than I, haven't taken a single life! Why? Why haven't you killed anyone?!” Lio loomed over me, his ragged breaths echoing in the desolate warehouse. "This won't do! I need a companion! I crave solace! This gnawing anxiety... it never lets up! All along, I believed you were the only one I could call my own, yet your betrayal has left me with a gaping wound. Should this continue, Shirazumi Lio will be consumed by his own Origin!"

What a foolish misunderstanding. The one who called himself Shirazumi Lio disappeared into the grass with unsteady steps.

"'Wait for me,'" his voice echoed. "Soon, I'll eliminate the cause of your restraints."

Those were the only words I registered. The meaning of his words hung heavy in the air, but the drugs clouded my mind, rendering me incapable of grappling with the potential consequences. My thoughts drifted aimlessly, latching onto trivialities like counting raindrops on the window or pondering the mundanity of tomorrow.

What had driven me to chase the serial killer in the first place? The reason, lost amidst the turmoil, refused to surface. Perhaps... Perhaps it was a desperate need for solace that propelled me out into the night. The return of the serial killings. The fragmented memories from four years ago. The fear that I'd kill him again.

"So that's it," I whispered, tears threatening to spill. "If the serial killer was truly out there, then that'd mean I wasn't the monster."

I longed for the past. I longed for the life I shared with him for half a year after waking. I longed to prove my ability to live a normal life, and to do so, I had to confront the serial killer. But I'd lost sight of that original goal.

I'd been lurking in back alleys, chasing him, and surrendered to the murderous urge within. Without realising it, I'd been drawn to Shirazumi Lio, and now I was his prisoner.

Three years ago, a mere serial killer wouldn't have registered on my radar. I'd become... weak. Revulsion surged as I lay alone, Shirazumi Lio's saliva clinging to my skin.

The rain continued outside. Foolish, pathetic. Fury boiled within me. I yearned to lash out, to blame someone for this. After all, it wasn't really my fault. He was the one who twisted me into this.

Yes, it was all because of him. Precisely because of him that I became like this. Because of him, I became weak. Without him, I wouldn't have ended up here. But without him, I wouldn't know how to continue living.

"What a goddamn fool I am..."

My head was swimming from the drugs. Sweat streamed down my face like tears, every breath a struggle against the oppressive heat. This humiliation–if anyone saw me now, I'd die of shame.

I had to get out of here. Now. I couldn't stay like this any longer. This wasn't where I belonged. Home. I needed to return home, to the place I was supposed to be.

But strangely enough, the image that emerged wasn't the Ryougi mansion, but an ordinary apartment where Kokutou Mikiya was waiting.

Murder Speculation / 6

In the end, I finally uncovered where he was truly lurking. Two hours after leaving the office, I arrived at a certain uninhabited warehouse by the harbour. Before I went to meet Ms. Touko, I'd already found out that this place was his true hideout, and where he concealed all of his drugs.

Within the pouring rain, I made my way to the largest warehouse among all of them. The front door was sealed shut, preventing any unwanted outsiders from entering.

Of course, it'd be impossible to open a door several times my size with a mere screwdriver. So I started walking toward the back of the warehouse. The walls were uniformly furnished with windows all throughout. As much as I would've liked to just break in through one of them, they were all situated over five-metres high. I had no hope of even touching them without a ladder. The warehouse was even bigger in person than it seemed, rivalling the size of a school gymnasium.

I continued walking, convinced there had to be another way in somewhere. Sure enough, I found it without much effort. Stationed on one of the grey walls was an entrance the size of a normal door. I silently approached, turning the knob. It was unlocked, so I had no problems sneaking in. I found myself in a narrow space that seemed to be some sort of storeroom. Right in front of me was another door leading into the warehouse proper. As I walked toward it, I suddenly heard a metallic clang.

"Wha..."

I pressed a hand on my head in response to the pain.

However, I fell toward the ground before I could even realise that it was the sound of me being struck from behind.

...

I awakened to the sensation of gulping something down. My eyes had finally begun adapting to the darkness as I roused my slumbering consciousness. I was in the same place as before. It'd probably only been a few minutes since I collapsed. For some reason, I felt so cold that I couldn't stop my body from shivering.

I tried to get up, but my left arm pulsed with pain. My elbow had been bent at some ungodly angle. That wasn't it, however. The backs of my knees had been gashed with a blade. I'd once ended up with quite a large wound there. For the record, it still hurt

whenever I tried to run. I attempted to stand, but it hurt so much that I thought I was going to pass out again.

Still, no pain was felt from when I was on the floor. The wounds were already closed, and they weren't bleeding anymore either. Even my bent arm didn't hurt at all. Honestly, it wasn't all too uncomfortable. The only thing bothering me was a strange sensation, like my body was swelling. That thing I swallowed earlier must've been some sort of drug. For example, something along the lines of morphine. I'd never heard of a painkiller that kicked in instantaneously, though. There was no way some magic drug like that actually existed.

"..."

I surveyed the room, spotting a figure by the wall. The person was sitting on a stack of rubble with his knees up.

"Sorry, but I'm not into tying up men. This was the best I could come up with."

He began to draw closer. That drug he gave me made my consciousness go blank. It felt like my mind was burning, and even my vision seemed to be bleached in white. Even then, I could clearly tell who was standing before me.

"Li...o."

"You just never learn, Kokutou. I warned you, didn't I? You'd better not hold this against me. I have to admit, though, I am glad to see you. You still searched for me, despite everything. I knew you'd always be on my side. Ah, what a waste. Ryougi Shiki doesn't deserve someone like you. Why did it take me so long to realise? All along, it was you that I should've made into one of my own."

He was speaking in a completely different tone than before. He was arrogant and haughty, unlike the person I once knew. However, it seemed to me like he was simply putting up an act.

"You won't be able to make anyone like you."

The moment I opened my mouth, my tongue went numb from the torment my body was enduring. Just because I couldn't feel the pain, it didn't mean all those terrible injuries weren't actually affecting my body. I felt my mind searing every time I spoke, and all I could do was endure it.

"Because that drug of yours has never fulfilled its purpose."

The room froze over. I heard the sound of him grinding his teeth together.

"Wow. I wasn't expecting you to have already pieced everything together. You're right, Kokutou. I wasn't giving out those drugs because I wanted to please those dumbasses. I can't deny that it helped me keep their mouths shut when I ended up feasting on impulse. To those morons, I was a hero who sold them drugs for practically nothing. They couldn't have cared less if I killed a person here and there. Still, that was just a fortunate side-effect to me."

He shrugged his shoulders and ceased to speak. If he wasn't going to say the rest, then I'd just have to do it for him.

"In the first place, it wasn't drugs that you were selling."

He scowled at me and breathed a sigh.

"It's exactly as you say. You see, I wanted someone who was similar to me by my side. But no matter how hard I looked, Ryougi was the only one I found. If so, then my only choice was to create them artificially, right? The cannabis I planted here came from Araya. It's a bit different from what you can usually find. It doesn't make you dependent, nor does it build any resistance, but it's a poison that the human body is incapable of dissecting. It's got a crazy high that destroys any semblance of rationality once you've done it a couple dozen times."

"And you gave Bloodchip to those people you corrupted."

"Corrupted? I only gave it to them because I saw their potential. Every single one of those sheets was made with my blood. Those who have awakened their Origins will be bound by it forever. I had an epiphany. I figured the blood of someone awakened possessed different properties than that of a normal human. In the end, I came close, but I never truly got what I wanted. While for some it was nothing but a mere drug, there were others who died because they couldn't handle it. What a shame. If they just held on a little longer, they could've become the same as me. Because of that, I ended up having to eat some corpses that I didn't even want to just so I could get rid of them."

"You said... you said you weren't killing them because you wanted to, didn't you?"

I felt like my throat was about to burn off, and yet I couldn't help but pose a foolish question. He looked at me with a frown.

"How rude. It isn't my fault that they perished. They were the ones who asked for it, and they were the ones who couldn't bear the burden. Well, I do pity them. If only they were special like me, then they would've never died in the first place."

I was too dazed to think straight. The drug he gave me was eating away at my consciousness.

"I went at it for three whole years, but it didn't work a single time. I was on the verge of losing hope. That was when Ryougi finally woke up. You must've been overjoyed, I know. After all, I felt the exact same. That's why I'm sure you understand me, partner. In that sense, you and I are accomplices. The two of us..."

He grinned at me smugly. All I could do was watch as he continued to speak.

"We were the ones who destroyed her three years ago. You shook her from the inside, while I took care of her surroundings."

I couldn't bring myself to deny his words. If either of us hadn't been there, then Shiki would've never ended up like that. It was precisely as he said—he and I had worked flawlessly together in order to break her apart.

"It was simple, really. That tendency she has to roam around at night made things easy for me. All I had to do was trail her, and then kill someone at her destination before she arrived! I ended up being seen the first time, but I got better and better as I continued racking up more kills. Remember how I rushed toward the Ryougi estate that day after we split up? Man, I couldn't have slaughtered that poor fellow any better even if I wanted to! You know, I pulled out all the stops because I wanted to show you my best work."

I couldn't make out the words coming out of his mouth properly anymore. My heart felt like it'd been set on fire, and I couldn't even breathe properly. This was the first time I'd ever felt like breathing could be so difficult.

"And the massacre on Monday was your doing too."

Yet, I continued to speak. He nodded in affirmation.

"That one hurt to watch. I went through all that trouble to make those men attack her, but all she did was stop them from moving. In the end, I was the one who had to clean up after her, but it seems like that shook her up pretty well."

He walked back toward the wall.

"It's about time. I'm sorry for making you suffer, Mikiya. Don't worry. I promise you'll be free from that anguish soon."

There was something on top of the rubble. He picked up a knife and some sort of stick with both his hands. That knife he was holding was Shiki's.

"Shiki... did you...?"

"No, I haven't done anything to her. I understand now. It was you that I needed all along. I couldn't care less about her anymore. I put her to sleep in a neighbouring warehouse, but I intend on letting her go tomorrow."

Skillfully handling both objects with each of his hands, he began to move toward me.

"Now, shall we get started? No need to worry. The only reason all my previous attempts have failed is because I've only given them drugs. Araya told me once, that the consent of both parties is required in order to awaken one's Origin. This time, it'll succeed for sure. If you so desire, you can have anything in this world. I swear I won't let you end up like everyone else. You *will* become special, Mikiya," he said in a brooding tone.

I shook my head in response.

"Even if... even if becoming special means disappearing? You were the one who told me that you didn't want that."

"Oh, come on. Were you really foolish enough to believe those words? Why would I be against it? It's because I awakened my Origin that I was finally able to become special. I'm stronger now. I can do things no ordinary person can do. No one can take me down, or even call me weak anymore. I can live my life in whatever way I want. The Shirazumi Lio from four years ago would've never been able to enjoy himself like I am now."

To be special. To be superior to others. That was his wish. However, that desire of his was something that anyone in this world harboured. If there was any sin worthy of condemning him for, then it'd be...

"You aren't going to disappear. I'm still the same person I've always been. There's no need to fear. The urges can be controlled, Mikiya. I've only been consuming humans because I want to do so. None of this has anything to do with my Origin's will. I chose to become a maneater of my own accord."

All he's doing is deceiving you in a bid to earn your sympathy. That was what Ms. Touko told me. But the truth was…

"Hm? Why are you so calm? I was looking forward to seeing you dumbfounded. That's odd. Why aren't you more surprised?"

He glanced at me in puzzlement. The truth was, I…

"I already knew that from the very beginning."

"...What?"

Instead, it was him that was utterly dumbfounded. I'd never truly believed in those words of his. From the moment I read his diary, I understood everything. That he gave up on living as a human long ago, and that the person known as Shirazumi Lio was already gone. Even then, when he asked for me to help him, those words were undoubtedly that of the Lio from four years ago. That was why I swore that I alone would do everything I could to save him.

"When you committed that murder, you threw away your self so that you could escape from the weight of your sins. The you that cherished Shiki sought her only in order to justify your own actions. But there was no love there. You…"

"Shut up!"

He shouted at me as he kicked my body. Fortunately for me, my whole body had already gone numb long ago.

"That doesn't matter. We're talking about you right now."

He brandished his knife in frustration. He cut the tip of the stick into the size of a pinky before putting it into his own mouth.

"Administering this drug in succession is bad for the body, but you leave me no choice. You're being a bit too stubborn."

He ruthlessly grabbed my hair and turned my face toward him. The next instant, he layered his lips upon mine. I tried to reject him, but he simply pushed my tongue away and moved what he was chewing into my mouth. All I could do was swallow it down.

"Now, everything will go as planned." His expression had returned to one of calm. "That was over ten doses worth. Your body won't be able to bear the burden. You need to take this before you die. Now then, make your choice. Do away with your present self, Mikiya."

He took out a red sheet of paper. My vision was getting too blurry to see properly.

"What are you doing? You can become special! You'll finally be free from the grasp of your boring, mediocre life! Can't you see how much fun it'll be? Why won't you just do as I say? Take it, Mikiya! You're the only one I want!"

He forcefully pushed the Bloodchip onto my unbroken arm, making me grasp it. He'd begun to lose his nerve at my lack of a response.

"Hurry up! Your body can't handle the effects of the drug I just gave you. Don’t you understand? You'll die if you don't take it! Die as someone ordinary, or live as someone special? Isn't it already obvious which choice to make?"

He was right, I didn't even have to stop to think about it. I shook my head from left to right.

"Why?"

It took him a moment to muster up a response. Even though I didn't have to, I felt that I should answer him anyway.

"That doesn't seem too interesting."

His expression froze over. It felt as though a crack had run through the frigid atmosphere of the room. Perhaps... Perhaps I was destined to die an early death.

"Honestly, you don't seem to be enjoying yourself too much. Besides, I'd rather be one of those ordinary people you mentioned. I don't want to be special."

Whatever semblance of humanity left in him faded from his eyes. Upon hearing that response, he finally recognised me as an enemy.

"What the hell... what the hell is that supposed to mean?! You're going to die if you don't listen to me! There's only one way for you to survive! Even Shirazumi Lio made that same choice four years ago! Everyone—everyone desires to be special, to be better than others! But then... why?!"

He could no longer hold back his fury. Then, he looked toward me with a smile playing on his lips. It was neither a smile of irritation, nor one of fear.

"Why? I don't understand you. Why are you capable of saying such a thing? I know you aren't lying. You aren't saying that because you want to put on a facade, or because you feel a sense of inferiority. You—you truly wish for such a thing from the bottom of your heart. You're mere moments away from dying. Stop trying to put on airs, goddamnit! You're broken. You aren't a normal human being. You're absolutely demented!"

"You're the one who isn't normal, Lio."

Along with my words came a fit of nausea welling up from my stomach. Perhaps if I'd chosen my words wisely, I would've been able to live longer.

"You chose to live the life of a madman. You turned your eyes away from the sin of murder and ran away from it. You told yourself you'd gone mad. You convinced yourself that there was nothing odd about a madman taking human lives. All you ever did was make excuses, lying to yourself that a deviant like you could never be expected to act like a normal human being! But that's no different from saying you hit somebody because you were pissed off. There's nothing right about that. Yet even to this day, you play the part of a lunatic in order to justify your actions and run away from your sins!"

From the day he accepted Araya Souren's help after taking his first life, Shirazumi Lio had already disappeared. He armed himself with the belief that he was permitted to exist as a madman, and sought kinship in Shiki. After all, having someone he could call his own would justify his actions. He could set his mind at ease, knowing he wasn't the only monster out there.

"Shut...up."

He narrowed his eyes as he met my gaze. It was my responsibility to say everything I had to say, or else there would've been no point in coming here.

"Shiki was born with a predisposition toward murder, but you convinced yourself that you were the same so you could curl up in your shell."

One was natural, while the other was artificial. One was born that way, and the other was built to be that way. He would've never realised their difference unless I spelled it out for him myself.

"We were wrong to call you a monster. You don't have any of the suffering that has tormented Shiki. You possess the ability to shed any emotion you deem unnecessary, but Shiki couldn't do that even if she wanted."

"Shut up, Kokutou."

"That's why—you'll never be the same as Shiki. You two are complete opposites. You refuse to recognize the sin of taking a human life as your own. All you are is a coward that can neither become a murderer or a monster. That is what you really are, Lio."

But he still asked for my help. Madness was the only choice he could come up with. Even then, I wanted to show him the error of his ways and help him become human again.

"I told you to shut up already, damn it!"

He screamed at me, cursed me with all his being. As he raised the knife above his head, I could only lie there watching, unable to stop him.

◇

The knife swung down. It began to rip through the air, his fury drawing ever closer to its endpoint. As his knife tore into my left brow, Kokutou Mikiya was unceremoniously severed from his connection to the world.

/ 6

Mikiya crumpled to the floor with a heavy thud, his face pressed against the cold concrete. He lay motionless, a crimson stain blooming around his head, soaking into the ground. I stared dumbfounded at the knife in my hand, unable to do anything. Fear kept me rooted to the spot, unable to approach his still body. He was gone.

"I'm so sorry... I didn't mean to."

My voice cracked in a whisper, lost amidst the sound of rain drops. Tears streamed down my face. The fondness Shirazumi Lio once held, from his student days, was slowly fading. Back then, when he dropped out, everyone mocked him in hushed whispers, questioning his sanity for leaving high school. But Kokutou Mikiya was different, offering genuine encouragement. Lio had never forgotten that kindness, the spark of joy that still flickered within him. And yet, the source of that very joy now lay lifeless before him.

A surge of rage had driven me to kill. I knew what I was doing. I knew that humans could die over the most trivial of things. That fact had never left my mind since the first time I killed. I'd known that I was utterly devoid of the luck needed to avoid such tragedies. But it wasn't my fault.

"Why did you fight back, Kokutou? You were always on my side. You understood me. Why... Why did you have to defy me?!"

Even if the world ostracised him, Mikiya's acceptance was all he craved. As long as Mikiya was there, it was enough. Lio finally grasped the truth Mikiya had been trying to convey. It wasn't Shiki that Lio loved; it was the monster within him, me, that craved Shiki. Once Shiki became like him, she'd lose her purpose. Special beings held value because of their uniqueness. That's why he'd planned to kill Shiki once she returned to normal.

Only after losing Mikiya did the truth hit him with brutal clarity. What he needed was a companion. And that companion was Mikiya. It was none other than Mikiya's presence that allowed me to hold onto a shred of my former self, of Shirazumi Lio. Only in front of him could I be the Lio that I once was. But that possibility was now beyond reach. Half of me was lost, along with the person who once occupied half of my world.

I'm sorry, Kokutou. The man you believed in... seems to be fading away here.

"...The other half."

But it was okay. I could go on living. Shirazumi Lio still had Ryougi Shiki. As long as she returned to me, a sense of calm would wash over me. Yes, that's right. Kokutou Mikiya wasn't necessary. Hadn't this been my objective all along? All I craved was the reassurance, the knowledge that others like me existed, consumed by the same urges.

I exited the room, retracing my steps towards the cannabis field in the warehouse. Shiki, the woman I'd once lusted after. The bloodthirsty monster more special than anyone else. She would be mine. A cruel smirk twisted my lips. Vivid images of her, glistening with sweat and saliva, flooded my mind, igniting an uncontrollable urge. I yearned to... do it. Revealing Kokutou's demise would surely jolt her back to her true nature. A genuine monster, driven to hunt me down.

The scenario sent a thrill coursing through me. And she was still under the influence of the drugs. I could devour her, starting from her toes, while she remained ever so helpless. Who else could offer such a thrilling stage? No one. None but me. My tongue darted out, as if mirroring my desire to savour her sweat, to taste her flesh.

"Sweat?"

I froze, standing amidst the cannabis field. Sweat? What was that? True, drugs often caused perspiration, but this was excessive. I'd only injected her with a muscle relaxant. There was no explanation for such a profuse sweat. Excessive sweating... as if her body was desperately purging itself of toxins.

"No way..."

I bolted, retracing my steps towards the building where I'd left Ryougi. Pushing through the tall grass, I sprinted with all my might. I reached my destination in mere seconds, and the sight that greeted me confirmed my worst fears.

"..."

Speechless with excitement, I stared into the warehouse. In the centre, amidst a barren patch devoid of cannabis, Ryougi Shiki stood defiantly, her eyes blazing with a demonic glint.

/ 7

◇

Ryougi Shiki was a vision of savage beauty. Shirazumi Lio, forgetting even to breathe, was captivated by the sight. The handcuffs, once her prison, were now useless. She hadn't removed them; she had severed them entirely. The metal ring, pristine, dangled from her right wrist like a large accessory. The only sign of her struggle was the injury to her left hand. To free herself, she had bitten through the flesh of her left thumb and finger.

◇

"Hahahaha!" Shirazumi Lio roared with laughter. "You're the best!" Even his laughter grated on my nerves. "The perfect monster!" His voice trembled with theatrical melodrama.

I was weary of this mongrel's yapping. I didn't have time for this.

"Let's get this over with, Ryougi. You're the only one who can keep me anchored."

Like a moth to a flame, he lurched towards me. I didn't even waste a glance.

"Find someone else. I'm done."

I spat the words out with resentment. He seemed confused, blinking in disbelief.

"What... did you say?"

"I said I don't have time to deal with you."

That's right. I didn't need the mantle of 'monster'. I could hand that over to him any day. I realised I'd already claimed what I craved a long time ago. The emptiness in my chest, the gaping hole, had been filled. My murderous urges would forever reside within me, but they were something I could endure. The reasons Shiki and SHIKI killed were distinct; I'd realised that during the summer incident. Those deadly duels were merely a desperate attempt to feel alive.

But now, even that motivation had waned. Even without them, I was slowly, steadily finding fulfilment. I wasn't the same Shiki I once was. I just needed to return and continue my unending battle with Ryougi Shiki, myself. Defeat was a possibility, but it wouldn't force me to seek refuge in the convenient label of a monster. For the one who had filled the void in my chest, and for SHIKI who had vanished for my happiness.

"This has gotta be some sort of joke, right?"

"See you later, psycho."

With that, I turned away. My body numb from the drugs, my torn left hand throbbing, I moved past Shirazumi Lio like a stranger. He stood rooted to the spot, his breaths ragged as he watched my retreating figure.

"So even you will betray me in the end?"

His whisper vanished into the rain's downpour. I simply listened to the rhythm of the rain.

"I won't forgive you. I killed for you, did everything for you, and now you cast me aside? Then Shirazumi Lio will cease to exist! You're the only one who can keep me grounded!"

Ignoring his pleas, I forced my wobbly legs forward, determined to leave the garden. Until I heard his next words.

"So, you're going back to Mikiya, Ryougi?" he murmured, a faint laugh escaping his lips. My feet froze in place. "Then there's no need to leave. He's right here."

A wave of nausea surged through me, blurring my vision. My thoughts scrambled. ...*Why? Just why?* How could those few words... *explain everything?*

"You..."

My voice failed me. Though I'd decided not to look back, I couldn't resist. I was trying, desperately trying, to live without the urge to kill.

"It's your fault, Ryougi. You're always so indecisive," he sneered. "So I took it upon myself to take care of it for you."

...I couldn't make sense of his words. It felt like my ears were ringing.

"Ah, yes. This was your knife, wasn't it? Here, take it back. Sorry for staining it."

A metallic clang echoed as the knife hit the ground. Its silver blade gleamed sickeningly crimson with blood. My knife, stained with someone else's blood. I knew exactly who. There was no room for error. I'd never forget the scent of *his* blood.

"...Oh. Are you really gone, Mikiya?" I whispered, stepping forward. I had to take my knife back from the concrete floor.

"Yeah, I killed him," he rasped. "I did it so that you could be free! Silly Kokutou, always playing the part of the good guy right till the end. He said we were complete opposites! Don't you think that's hilarious? How could he not see how alike we truly are?"

The rain was deafening. I approached the knife and knelt on the cold concrete. The blood on the blade was still fresh. This weapon had tasted blood just minutes ago. *Oh. So close, and so recently.*

I'd lost him.

"...You idiot. I told you to stay with Touko. Only someone like you could die to such a stupid death."

Just remember, I'll never forgive you if you kill him.

The man who bound me was killed by the very creature he protected. How could he? He belonged to me. Only I had the right to end his life.

"..."

I picked up the knife, gripping it tightly with both hands. I stood, staring at the ground, the blade pressed against my chest. I opened my mouth, my gaze fixed on the floor.

"...Fine, let's do this."

Without looking at my opponent, I remained hunched over. There was no point in looking up. The beast was no longer visible to me.

"You said you'd never forgive me. Looks like that's one thing you and I share between us, Shirazumi."

The beast charged, but I ignored it, remaining motionless. I could deal with him later. For now, I wanted to savour this moment. This fleeting moment where the warmth of his blood still lingered on the knife.

◇

Shirazumi Lio tensed, ready to charge. Shiki, however, remained motionless despite the approaching beast. A sickening crunch tore through the silence as the creature's claws ripped into her arm. Blood streamed down, yet Shiki stayed bent over, her hands cradling the knife like a precious relic.

The warmth of shared moments faded. The heat of their bodies, the touch of his skin. The hope he'd kindled within her, the heart he believed in. Blood flowed, wounds deepened, and her body grew colder. But she felt little pain, for she knew a far greater one now. We chased each other endlessly, drenched in the cold rain.

—— Yes. Frozen breaths, the only warmth between us. We watched each other's hearts beat, on the verge of fading.

The sickening thud echoed through the room as more flesh continued to be ripped away. The enemy, relishing the hunt, toyed with her lifeless form. With blinding speed, it lunged, tearing into her flesh. Outside, the rain continued its relentless downpour. I realised how simple joys had once enlightened my life.

—— Like rain, pouring down like mist after school as I listened to your whistling.

The third time, her leg was torn. A sickening squelch followed as concrete soaked with blood. The claws, embedded deep in her bone, stained her foot and the floor, making even

standing excruciating. Indeed, merely standing brought agony. But I recalled moments of shared laughter. SHIKI, after all, loved you too.

—— Like the sunset, painting the classroom in fiery hues as we talked.

The enemy's prowess had escalated beyond recognition. Unnatural speed and precision surpassed any creature of flesh and bone. In contrast, I was utterly worthless. My heart was frozen, and soon my body would stop moving too. Yet, a perverse sense of satisfaction bloomed within me. My arms still functioned. When the creature lunged again, it would undoubtedly meet its demise.

—— Simply seeing your laughter brought me such joy.

On the fourth time, the creature lunged. Its target: her right arm. Despite knowing its intent, she remained frozen. For killing was wrong.

—— Simply walking beside you brought me such happiness.

Blood loss clouded her vision, her body teetering on the brink of collapse. But she remained steadfast, bound by her promise. She couldn't kill Shirazumi Lio. Even as her life ebbed away, his words lived on within her, a beacon of warmth she swore to protect, forever.

—— We paused for just a moment, bathed in the warm, dappled sunlight.

But I was happy. Happy that you treated me like a normal person. Happy that you tried so hard to stop me from taking lives. Though I'd never be willing to tell you the truth, you were a miracle to me, so breathtakingly beautiful.

—— You smiled, assuring me we would return to this spot someday.

The fifth claw loomed. This would surely be my end. The enemy would strike at my neck. A slash to my carotid artery would be more than enough to extinguish my already fading life.

—— Those words... I had always longed to hear them from someone.

Death neared. As I reflected, my memories were filled with joy, a smile involuntarily spreading across my face. Just a year ago, then half a year. Time had flown, slipping through my grasp. But I was grateful nonetheless. I was incredibly blessed. A monotonous, mundane high school life. The remnants of peaceful days untouched by strife.

—— Those were truly dreamlike days.

Thank you. But I'm sorry. I raised my face to witness his death. I know I'll lose everything. Everything you believed in, the me you claimed to love. Despite it all, I've decided to take his life. Even if it means losing everything about myself, and even if it means condemning myself to solitude. Still, I'll never be able to forgive him for taking you away from me.

Her gaze locked on the charging enemy. The rest was child's play. Like a white bird erupting from the water's surface, the final blow would be elegant. The end, a mere heartbeat away.

◇

The end was shockingly abrupt. As Lio's arm lunged for her neck, she severed it. Without hesitation, she then severed both his legs. With a swift, merciless motion, she plunged her knife into his body, which momentarily floated like a balloon, before slamming him to the ground. The knife, a cruel tombstone, pierced his heart. He gasped once, a final breath, and then it was over. Lio's face remained frozen in shock, too stunned to comprehend the fate that had befallen him as his life functions ceased.

◇

The knife was thrust into Lio's chest like a tombstone. Still kneeling, she clung to its hilt. Sunlight slanted through the window, casting an ashen glow. Illuminated by this deathly light, she resembled a priest officiating at a funeral, drained of all colour.

Lio's corpse showed no bleeding; the vibrant crimson staining the warehouse floor was solely hers. With limbs torn and flesh ripped, her life would likely be measured in mere minutes. Or perhaps, as Ryougi Shiki, she could potentially extend that time until help arrived. But she made no move. A sigh escaped her lips as she relinquished the knife, collapsing onto the cold floor.

"Ah," she breathed. She extended her breaths, severing the nerves in her bleeding wounds. Perhaps she would be able to conserve enough energy to call for help by resting like this.

"But... what's the point?" she murmured, her gaze drifting skyward. Beyond the window, rain, as always, dominated the winter view. It was under such skies that her hands became

stained, a recurring winter ritual. Returning home in this state was unthinkable. Drenched in blood and sullied by mud, all that awaited her was a stern scolding.

"And yet, he waited..."

Memories surfaced: shared walks, hands clasped despite the grime, a journey home together. Days that felt like a beautiful dream.

"It was almost like a lie," she gasped, her consciousness flickering like a dying candle. Her fading life, ephemeral as a mirage, held a strange beauty. She regulated her breaths, not for life, but for slumber.

Tears welled up in her eyes, fixed on the heavens. She had made a vow. Tears would only fall for his death. With a final breath, her eyes fluttered shut. Regret was a distant echo. A silent thought resonated: without Mikiya, life held no purpose. Just like how a beast, once warmed by fire, could never return to the cold, she could never go back to the empty self she once was.

Murder Speculation / 7

I was being severed from the world. At first, that was all that came to mind. I expelled everything from inside my stomach with a hurl. The only reason I was able to regain consciousness despite losing all semblance of rationality was because my body clung desperately to life.

I somehow managed to prop my body up with a single functioning arm. My legs wouldn't move the way I wanted them to no matter how hard I tried. I mustered all of my strength and crawled toward the wall, placing my hand on the wall to support me as I stood up. My vision had begun to recover, but all I could see were some vague outlines. Everything looked blurry and obscured by a filter of white.

"It hurts."

I didn't know where it was coming from, but I could tell that some part of my body was in terrible pain. I pressed my hand onto my left eye. Only a slight bit of bleeding was left. The drug he made me swallow must've done something to aid my recovery. Most of the blood around the area had already clotted. It seemed like I didn't have to worry any longer about dying from blood loss.

Needless to say, that didn't mean the wound itself had healed. He slashed me from my forehead all the way down to my cheek, destroying my entire left eye. The fact that I could still breathe, and the fact that I hadn't lost my right eye in the crossfire was a miracle in and of itself. It'd be foolish of me to wish for my left eye back when I'd already gotten so lucky. Using the wall to support my weight, I trudged across the warehouse. There was some sort of grass growing throughout the area, but I couldn't tell what it was. I was dealing with the pain, blood loss, and the effects of the drug on top of it all. The best I could do was focus my entire being on a single thought.

"Shi...ki."

I kept walking. The warehouse was too wide, and all the grass was making it hard to find her. With every single step I took, the sheer amount of pain robbed me of my consciousness. I'd pass out, wake up the next moment, and then take another step. What did I want to do so desperately that I was willing to endure such anguish? I was simply dragging along my bloodstained body, unaware if I was even alive anymore.

"..."

My legs gave out as I tumbled to the ground. Since I'd fallen onto the mud the grass was planted on, it didn't aggravate my wounds too much. If I couldn't count on my knees anymore, then the last thing I could do was crawl. I didn't know where to begin searching for her. My left eye was burning with pain, while my right eye couldn't see anything. I had

no hope of ever making any progress like this. I needed a quick break. There was no guarantee that Shiki was here. It was completely possible that I was only needlessly bringing myself closer to death. Despite coming to that conclusion, I couldn't bring myself to stop.

"I wonder... why."

It was obvious—because I wanted to see her. If she had already killed Lio by the time I found her, then what could I possibly do?

Just remember, I'll never forgive you if you kill him.

Those were my true feelings. I'd meant it when I said those words to her. I would do whatever I could to stop her from killing. I didn't care if anyone else in the world committed murder. But Shiki—she was the one person for whom I'd never allow that. Because I loved her. Because I wanted to keep loving her. All I wanted was for her to find happiness. All I wanted was to stop her from suffering any more than she already had. What a selfish, greedy person I was. Even if it were Shiki, I'd end up resenting anyone who committed the crime of murder. I said I believed in her, but I was only trying to convince myself of that. The truth was that I simply wanted to be able to believe in her. After all, I knew I'd hold it against her forever if she took a life.

"I'll never forgive you... if you kill him," I muttered in a daze as I pressed forward.

I waded through the grass, eventually arriving at an empty space. A large expanse with a concrete floor, bathed in rays of the sun. Shiki was right there, with Lio's body sprawled out beside her. They both laid there motionlessly, as though they were corpses.

"Did you... kill him, Shiki?" I felt regret welling up in my chest, however that wasn't important now. Only Shiki lay within my sight, and no one else. I crawled toward her.

She had a tranquil look on her face. She was drenched in blood, with wounds covering her entire body. Her face was as pale as a ghost, and entirely devoid of any warmth. But even then, she was still breathing.

"Thank God. She's still alive."

I apologised to Shirazumi Lio as I found myself relieved at her survival. He didn't make it. No matter what the circumstances may have been, there was no doubt that it was Shiki who killed him. This result was the end of his story, and his alone. He was the victim here—the sole individual with a right to be mourned.

"Still, the fact that Shiki's still alive is more important than any of that to me, Lio."

I couldn't bring myself to pity him. If anything, I even resented him. Because of him, Shiki would forever be…

At that moment, a white finger brushed my cheek.

Then, I realised—it was Shiki. Her delicate fingers caressed my cheek as though she were tracing it.

"Are you crying, Kokutou?"

She could barely keep her eyes open. Within her hazy consciousness, she simply continued to run her fingers across my face. Perhaps she mistook the blood for tears instead. She was too exhausted to prop her body up, while I lacked the strength to even embrace her.

Within the rain, our frozen breaths were the only warmth between us. We just laid there, watching each other's hearts beat, on the verge of fading.

"I... killed Shirazumi," she muttered.

"Yeah, I know," I responded.

She took a quick glance at his corpse, and gazed upon the sky in a daze.

"With this, I've lost too many things to count."

It was a tone of sadness, of emptiness. There was no getting them back anymore. The self she'd built up over these years, and the things she'd deemed precious to her were all gone now. Perhaps she even counted me among those she'd lost. But most importantly—she'd never be able to kill herself now. She could no longer shoulder the burden of that sin. It was just as her grandfather once said. She'd lived by his words, and now she was destined to die in solitude, just as he did. It'd be a lonely, empty burial.

"That doesn't matter to me. I told you, didn't I? I'll shoulder that burden for you."

A single streak of blood streamed down my left eye, falling onto Shiki's cheek. Indeed, it looked just like I was crying. At the end of a certain summer, I made a vow when you first smiled at me. I'll shoulder that burden for you. *When the time comes...*

...I'll be the one to kill you instead.

Until the day you die, I swear that you will never be alone.

"But I'm... a murderer."

Her voice was faint, as if her heart lied in a different place. She looked just like a child on the verge of tears, blaming herself for losing everything. She understood what her actions meant. Her sin would never vanish, and that sorrow of hers would follow her no matter how much she begged for forgiveness. Even I couldn't free her from the weight of her choice. Nobody in the world was capable of relieving her from that burden.

"I told you, didn't I? We humans must never take the life of another person. You're a fool for not listening to me. This time, I'm really, really pissed off. No amount of crying is going to change that."

"Ah, so you won't forgive me even if I cry?"

"No. As if I'd ever let you deceive me like that."

A pointless, dull conversation. Regardless, I'd reprimand her as much as I needed to if it made her feel any better. With a smile so faint that I could barely even make it out, Shiki silently closed her eyes. She was calm, as though she were about to descend into slumber. My crimson tears cascaded down her cheek.

With my numbed arm, I brought her tattered body closer to me. *If no one, not even yourself can mend that scar of yours, then I will at least remain by your side forever.* I embraced her tightly, so tightly that it felt like both of us were going to die from it.

Before my consciousness faded once more, I uttered one final vow.

"Shiki. For as long as you live, I will never forgive you."

My words were drowned out by the ceaseless sound of the pouring rain. All we had left to us were our fragile fingers that sought each other out.

/ 8

...

Winter lingered in the city, even as February faded. A chill hung in the air, and the news promised an unexpected snowfall for the first time in four years tomorrow. March had barely begun, yet winter's icy grip refused to loosen. Spring, it seemed, was still a distant dream.

...

The bloodthirsty monster who had plunged the town into terror met their end at the hands of a fatal drug overdose. That's how the story concluded. Shirazumi Lio's body was recovered by the police, while Ryougi Shiki and Kokutou Mikiya somehow survived, having been taken into protective custody as victims. Mikiya received treatment at a regular hospital, but for me, it was a different story.

After all, Touko had crafted a prosthetic for my severed left hand, making a normal hospital visit out of the question. Thanks to the Ryougi family's influence, I was admitted to a private clinic and subsequently cared for by Touko.

While I recovered in February, Mikiya remained bedridden until today. The combination of his injuries and the process of detoxifying him from the administered drugs kept him hospitalised for three weeks. That ordeal, thankfully, ended today. Despite needing further hospitalisation, Mikiya, finding the hospital unbearably boring, was being discharged.

And so I stood alone, under the frigid sky. At the grand entrance of the national hospital, I kept a vigilant watch on the flow of people, stationed beneath a large tree set back from the circular driveway. After two hours of this, a figure emerged from the hospital, clad head-to-toe in black, save for the white bandage on his hand. He offered a polite bow to the nurses and doctors before heading directly towards me. I remained silent, my gaze fixed on his approach.

"...Unbelievable. I can't believe you didn't even visit me once," Mikiya grumbled, a sour look etching his features.

“Azaka was really pissed off. She threatened to kill me if I showed up in your room. How could I go after that?" I retorted, mirroring his frown.

Mikiya sighed, a resigned air settling around him.

"Shall we head out then? Want to take a taxi?"

"The station's not that far. Let's just walk," I suggested.

"All right," he agreed, though he added, "It might be a bit much for someone fresh out of the hospital."

We walked side-by-side, the usual idle chatter filling the air as we descended the gentle slope toward the station. I glanced at Mikiya. He'd let his hair, especially the bangs that now draped over his left eye, grow out, casting an even darker shadow over his face.

"Your left eye," I murmured.

Mikiya shrugged indifferently. "Yeah, ruined, just like Shizune said. Remember that girl I spent an hour with at the cafe?"

"The girl with foresight? I remember," I confirmed.

"Yeah," he said. "She predicted I'd meet a terrible fate if I got involved with you. Well, her prediction was definitely spot on. It was pretty awful."

Despite everything, Mikiya let out a cheerful laugh. My cheeks flushed with irritation.

"What kind of reaction do you expect, you idiot?" I thought to myself.

"No worries about my right eye, though," he continued. "It's not a big deal at all. It's just... it's a bit harder to make some finer details out now. So, could you walk on my left side? I'm not too confident that I can cover for it properly just yet."

Before I could reply, Mikiya manoeuvred me to his left and even leaned on me for support.

"What are you doing, all of a sudden?" I asked, surprised but trying to maintain composure.

Mikiya scowled, locking his gaze with mine. "Using you as a crutch, obviously. For the next week until I get used to walking like this, I'll be counting on your support, okay?" he declared, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

I glared at him. "The hell? Why me?"

"Because I want you to," he replied. "But if you really don't want to, I won't force you."

Something must have happened to Mikiya at the hospital; his clear, unwavering gaze sent chills down my spine. I averted my eyes, blushing.

"Well, I don't mind..." I mumbled.

Mikiya's face broke into a happy smile. What a carefree guy. His infectious happiness was starting to rub off on me.

"But I have school tomorrow," I reminded him.

"Skip it," he nonchalantly replied. "Spring break is coming up, I'm sure the teachers won't mind."

"...You."

The same person who constantly lectured me about the importance of school was now suggesting such an irresponsible thing. Something had clearly changed during his hospital stay. I decided to ask him about it later, a wry smile playing on my lips.

"What's wrong, Shiki?"

"Oh, I just thought you were being rather selfish."

Mikiya blinked, surprise flickering across his face, before breaking into a smile. "Yeah, I suppose I have been. I've been selfishly in love with you for years now. And I still am. No matter how much you resist, I've made the selfish choice to take care of you forever." Without a hint of embarrassment, he delivered the cheesiest line imaginable.

My usual retort hung on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed it back. To be honest, deep down, even the old me had always...

"Hey, what's wrong? You don't like cheesy lines, do you? You've always said you hated them." Mikiya seemed genuinely taken aback, and thus dug his own grave. I'd planned to stay silent, but a change of heart swept over me. ...Yeah. I guess it was about time I finally voiced how I really felt.

"No, not really," I mumbled, turning my head slightly.

"Huh?" Mikiya's surprise was evident.

"See, Mikiya, the current Shiki doesn't hate that sort of thing." *Ugh, this was mortifying*. I would never say that again.

Stealing a glance at Mikiya, I found him staring off into space, a look of stunned disbelief etched on his face, like a man who'd just witnessed a breaching whale. The mental blow must have been severe. It looked so ridiculous that I reached out to take his hand. I pulled him along, quickening my pace as we started down the hill.

The station loomed just ahead. Eager to get home, I tugged on his arm. He eventually returned the grip, his hold firmer than mine. For some reason, this small gesture filled me with joy. I suppressed a smile as we continued down the hill. Soon, we arrived at the station and returned to our familiar town.

A winding road home. It was a long, arduous journey that stretched endlessly, but our intertwined hands guided us forward. I craved no weapon, no reward, just that familiar touch. No matter what lay ahead, I knew I wouldn't let go. And so, the curtain closed on my story. Embracing both who I was now and the person I'd been, I would face the days ahead. Just like this season, I'd bide my time quietly, patiently waiting for spring's warm embrace to loosen winter's icy grip.

/ Murder Speculation (Part 2) — End

Kara no Kyoukai

The Boundary of Emptiness

The Garden of Sinners

Bhūtakoṭi /

Snow in the city. In four years none heavier. In March, midwinter. Biting frost. By day and by night, fresh falls of rock crystal. The streets retrieved a quiet archaic deadness.

Midnight, then.

Outside was no-one. Meager lamplight against a veil of snow. A white-painted dark. But he went out; he chose to. For a walk, let us say. No goal especially in mind. He had nothing more than a presentiment. He followed it. He followed it through the city, through floes of piling snow. In hand a black umbrella.

And at last she indeed was there. Four years ago, then as now. Just such a snowblown, vacant night. The girl in the kimono had stood there. She gazed vaguely into the dark. Then as now, he greeted her frankly. A friend. And she heard him, turned her head. She smiled.

—It's been a while, Kokutou.

Back then he had not recognised her. Nor indeed now. But she, it seemed, had always known who he was. And a gentle smile came to her face.

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—It's been a while, Kokutou.

Ryougi Shiki was her name. But the tone she now took was unfamiliar. Who stood here was neither the Shiki he knew, nor the other he had known, but another still, altogether unknowable.

—It is you, then.

A pause.

—Somehow I thought it would be. Is Shiki - asleep, then?

—She is. Right now it's just me and you.

She smiled. Flawless, incarnate, feminine smile. He questioned her.

—And who are you?

—I am I. Neither this Shiki nor that. I am simply I, the inmost reach of a hollow heart. Or maybe just the hollow heart itself.

Her hand to her chest. Her eyes closed.

Once, she had told him:

Accept everything, and you'll never be hurt. Whatever disagrees with you, whatever is hateful to you, whatever you won't acknowledge - simply accept it all, without the slightest resistance, and you'll never be hurt.

But it's just the same the other way.

Reject everything, and you can only be hurt. Whatever agrees with you, whatever you like, whatever you acknowledge - simply reject it all, without the slightest consent, and you can only be hurt.

That was how she, and he, had been. The two of them. Their way of life.

—A heart that only affirms and denies is isolated because it is complete. Wouldn't you agree? Unsullied monochrome will never fade, because its colours never mix. They remain always the same.

—Thus the two of them. I would liken she and he each to an extremity, opposite poles on a single foundation. Between them, nothing. And within that nothing? I.

—I see, he said. You're between the two. Then I'm not sure how I should address you. I guess you're "Shiki" as well?

His puzzled demeanor - amused her.

—No. Ryougi Shiki is just what I've been named. Though I'm glad if that's enough to have you call me Shiki. That alone makes it worth having waited this long.

As she said this, smiling, she seemed neither decisively childlike nor adult.

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They spoke of meaningless things. He talked, like always. She was happy to listen. Their relation was the same as always. Only, in truth, she was not. She alone differed. She came to realize that difference, which cut between them. And to despair that there could be no intermixture.

—Tell me. Four years ago. Shiki has no memory of it, does she?

Suddenly he had to know. At long last he had to. He had met Shiki in high school, but when he did he knew at once that he had met her somewhere before. He'd told her of this. She had denied it.

—She doesn't. I am not the same as them. He and she stood side-by-side, as it were, and could know each other well. I do not. I could not be so perceived by them. Shiki won't remember tonight, either.

I see, he whispered. That's too bad.

Four years ago. March 1995. He met her.

Really a very trivial thing. It was his last night of middle school. Snow was falling. He had been on the the way home, this very road. He had caught sight of her. A lone girl standing in the road, looking vaguely up to the sky. He had passed her by, gone home. But later, trying to sleep, he'd suddenly remembered that girl. So he'd stepped out for a walk. And when he found that she'd been standing there all that time, he spoke to her. Good evening, he'd said, easily as one would to an old friend. But only for the snow had been so beautiful.

No doubt he'd just been lonely himself.

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—Kokutou. There is something I'd ask of you. And I'm sorry to say that that is to be the extent of our conversation. It is the only reason I am here.

She looked at him. Her eyes far older than she seemed.

—What is it that you want?

Such a vague question he couldn't even begin to answer. Her expression was vacant, machinelike.

—Your wish, Kokutou. Tell me it. I can grant most human wishes. And Shiki seems to like you, so - what's mine by right is yours.

—Now tell me. What do you wish for?

She held out her hand. Her gaze was clear, transparent, infinitely deep. A gaze that took in all, to the utmost. Inhuman, somehow godlike.

I wonder, he said. He thought about it, just a little. He met her gaze. No, it wasn't that he didn't want anything. Nor that he didn't believe her.

Nothing, he answered. I don't need it.

She closed her eyes. Ah. A long sigh, as if immensely disappointed. Though not without a tinge of affectionate relief.

—Yes. That should have been obvious.

She turned her gaze away from him. To the long bright dark of the sky.

—You're really not Shiki.

He said it so pitifully. She did not deny it. She nodded her head.

—I wonder, Kokutou. Where do you think a "personality" exists?

From nowhere, that simple, unaffected question. As casual as asking after tomorrow's weather. There was a feeling of hollowness to the words, as if she hadn't the slightest concern for whatever answer he might give. But all the same. His hand to his chin; he thought about it.

—Well, I don't really know. Someone's "personality", that's their mind, isn't it. Their intellect. So I guess I'd say it's inside their head.

Inside the head: in short, the brain. Where the intellect resides. He said as much. She shook her head.

—There was a magus once who said: the soul resides in the brain. The fleshly body is just a prosthetic; really you could keep a brain alive in a vat, wired up to some dream or simulation, and it'd make no difference. Here you endorse the same view. That the personality, in sum, is inside the head.

—But that is not the case.

—Take yourself, for example, Kokutou. You are a human being, you are a personality, you are a soul. What is it that gives you, as such, your definite shape? Two things. Intellect, in which your life's peregrinations pile up, and flesh, the notional hollow husk. True, the brain bears the intellect. It gives rise to the intellect. But the brain by itself does not produce a "personality" expressive of what you are.

—You may say that the brain could at least "subsist" by itself. But that's all. We are fleshly, embodied creatures, and it is only because we are that we can recognise ourselves as "selves" to begin with. The personality, the individual character that you are - it grew up as one with the flesh. Those who make a friend of their body surely come to bear sociable personalities, while those who don't become gloomy and introverted. A personality could develop as pure intellect, but such a personality would not reflect upon itself; it would have no sense of itself, and it would mature, if that's the right word, into something quite unlike a human being. In the end it would amount to nothing more than a calculating mechanism, which can't really be called a "personality" at all.

—A "person" like that who became nothing but a brain would have to create a new personality befitting their new self. They would have to discard the organic, bodily consciousness, and take the restricted, brain-bound, intellectual consciousness as their ultimate foundation.

—You see, it is not the case that you simply have the intellect here, the flesh there, on the same level so to speak.

—The flesh is there first, and intellect arises out of it. Is borne out of it.

—The flesh, we may say, becomes the basis of the intellect. It does not itself "have" an intellect. The flesh simply "is." But the flesh does have a personality, a will, of a kind. It grows up as one with, and gives birth to, the intellect. That - is what I am.

Ah, he said. He'd heard it somewhere before, hadn't he. That the human being is composed of three different things. Mind and soul, to which is added the fleshly body. Supposing, then, that the mind resides in the brain, and the soul in the body. That makes her - what? Shiki's essence. Her true character. A personality, "the body", with nothing of Shiki's heart.

Gently, she nodded her head. Ryougi Shiki did.

—Basically, that's how it is.

—"I" am not a personality borne of the intellect. I am the personality of the flesh as such.

—Ultimately, Shiki - he and she could exchange with one another because they held my currency in common. A single foundation governed them both. That is "Ryougi Shiki." You

know Ryougi is *liangyi*, so it stands to reason that two *liangyi* together make a *taiji*, doesn't it? That is me. I am that which takes the shape of the *taiji*, its circular outline.

—They were my creations. Each of them an "I" of the same order as myself. Or, no; since they each possessed a will, an inclination of their own, you could say they were of a higher order than myself. Even if they were different personalities, their lines of thought were one in that they were both essentially the good and evil within "Ryougi Shiki." They originated from me, and concluded with me. Had they not, their differing inclinations should never have been able to coexist.

She giggled. The gaze that now fell across him was more than ever cold and fatal.

—I don't fully understand, he said. You're saying that you are the original pattern, the original model of which Shiki and SHIKI are both derivatives.

—Correct. I am the essence of Ryougi Shiki. The essence which does not appear. Since the fleshly body is indeed unable to "think," and since that is all I am, under normal circumstances I would simply have rotted away in that thoughtless state without ever rising to the surface. Essentially I am just " ". And that which is " " can have neither intellect nor significance. Normally.

—But I was born a Ryougi, which is not a normal circumstance. The members of the Ryougi family bestowed an intellect upon me. Upon that hollow, thoughtless thing. They had plans for their daughter: they wanted to make Ryougi Shiki into an all-capable human being. So they tried to inculcate her with various personalities, and in the course of that they awakened me. The "original pattern", as you said, of her intellect. As the ground for everything that came afterward, I then created Shiki. She and he.

Ah, he said. Let slip a sigh. The twinned Shiki, *yin* and *yang*, good and evil. It was not antagonism which divided them. Aozaki Touko, the magus, had described it otherwise. That they were divided insofar as each comprehended all the attributes it possibly could.

—A real comedy of errors has brought me here, you know. In truth I should have been a premature birth and perished like that, nothing more. Instead I ended up obtaining a "self" of sorts.

—The simple truth is that I was born dead. Perhaps brain-dead would be more accurate. Normally a newborn will have an infant's body, and this body in turn will be quickened by the first stirring of what's to become its intellect. I did not have that; I was born with

nothing whatsoever. By rights I should have died immediately. That which is near to " " simply must not be born bodily into the world. You heard this from Touko, didn't you? The world itself wards off anything that might disrupt it. Ordinarily, indeed, I should not have been born at all.

—Ordinarily a creature whose being is poured out straight from " " simply dies in its mother's womb. That was my case. But the Ryougi clan possessed a technique for keeping such a thing alive.

—So I was born, alive, but without so much as a stirring of intellect. " " is utter nullity, and thus an intellectual nullity as well. I should simply have "lived" with no cognition of the outside world.

—But not only did they keep me alive, they woke me up. They did not implant some readymade personality into me. They awakened the " " which is my origin. The outside world was thrust upon me. I - the void and vacant "I" - was forced to look at it. I found it an eyesore. I found it altogether too troublesome. So I in turn thrust it upon those two.

—It was only natural. The outside world, if you could call it that, was the most wearisome thing imaginable. Because it was, all of it, down to the last of its innumerable atoms, "already known" to me.

Innocent eyes were smiling. An ice-cold, somehow scornful gesture.

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—But you do have a will.

She seemed to him then such a tragic figure that he had to say it. Again she nodded.

—I do, after a fashion. A personality of the flesh as such arises in every human, but ordinarily it does not come to any kind of self-awareness. Usually, before that can happen, the intellect stirs to life. From out of the body, more precisely the brain, the intellect is produced.

—The intellect borne out of the brain's activity becomes a personality and gains executive function over the fleshly body. At that point any personality which dwelt in the flesh becomes meaningless.

—It's because of this that the intellect tends to treat the brain which gave birth to it as if it were something specially set apart from the rest of the fleshly body, even though it is just one part of the whole.

—Software is useless without hardware, but hardware can't function without software. The personality born of the intellect forgets this truth: it forgets that it is the body's product, and it imagines that it is the creator of this fleshly, embodied "I" which it finds itself to be. That is the ordinary case. I am different only in that the order in which these things happened was different for me.

—Even so, the fact that I'm here, now, talking to you is entirely due to the personality of Shiki. If she wasn't here, I wouldn't even have language. I am, after all, nothing but flesh.

—I think I get it, he said. Your ability to "know" or "perceive" the outside world is dependent on Shiki's personality.

—Correct. I am simply an unpowered piece of hardware. Without the requisite software I am just an inert box.

—I am a hollow container which only gazes inward, which communes solely with death - in other words with what Magi call the "Root", though I see no value in it whatsoever.

Quietly, all but without his notice, she took a step towards him. She held out her hand to his face. With a pale, slender finger she parted his forelock. Beneath it was a single scar.

—Mind you, right now I think there might be a little value to it after all. I could heal a wound like this, for instance. I could come to your aid. Disturb the universe a little. But you don't wish for any of that, do you?

—No, he answered. Shiki's specialty is breaking things. It would be asking too much. I'd be afraid for myself.

How serious, that reply? He gave a light smile. Like a butterfly scattered in the afternoon light, her gaze left him in a moment. She lowered her hand, softly as the snowfall.

—Quite right. Shiki can only destroy. And to you, after all, I suppose I am she.

—Shiki?

A long pause.

—My origin is nihil. From nihil I originated, the flesh that I am, the corpse in the womb to which life was somehow given. That is why Shiki can perceive death. For two years, in her comatose state, she was unable to view the outside world, and could do nothing but gaze into the nihil that Ryougi Shiki "is." More than simply seeing, she felt death.

—All that time she was floating there in that ocean which others call the "swirl of the Root." Shipwrecked all alone in the midst of " ".

Yes, indeed.

If nihil is her origin, then most likely she wills to bring all things to nought. Shiki is able to kill anything without exception, for that reason alone. The personality, Shiki, strives to negate. Why? Because that is the original pattern of her soul. The inclination to nihil, which ardently wishes the death of all creation.

—That is Shiki's capability. Much like Asagami Fujino, she perceives a unique channel in which things unseen by others become visible. When she "looks" at them, she is seeing a glimpse of the architect's floor-plan for all reality. That is the "swirl of the Root."

—But I can see much further than that. No, rather - I may well be that "swirl" myself.

She was looking him right in the eye, but her tone of voice was insecure, uncertain. As if to let slip, between moments, an utterly incommunicable loneliness.

—The swirl of the Root is a "place" where all casualties interlace, where all things are in potential, and therefore where nothing is whatsoever. That is my true shape. Though I am merely bound to it, I am nonetheless a part of it. And the part and the whole of a nothingness are the same, wouldn't you say?

—So I can do - whatever. Recompose the laws of nature, revert living beings to their evolutionary forebears. To overturn the system of the world, there's simply nothing to it. It's not a remaking. I simply crush the old one with the new world in its place.

She was faintly smiling as she said that. There was a wry twist to her mouth, as if she was mocking how ridiculous she sounded.

—But it's all so pointless, isn't it? Such a tiresome thing. Such nonsense, you might as well dream it up. As indeed I do. Without seeing, without thinking, without even dreaming - I dream.

—That said, mine and Shiki's dreams seem to be different. Shiki, you see - she hates to be alone. I know. So pedestrian, isn't it? How tiresome Shiki is. How tiresome reality is. How tiresome - I am.

Her voice, barely even a whisper. She was looking somewhere afar, deep into the night. As if it was of incalculable importance, something never to be seen again.

—But there's no helping it, I'm afraid. I am a body and nothing more, after all. We are the one thing, she and I, so I've no choice but to follow along with her dream.

—Shiki is looking at the outside, while I am looking at the interior. But the interior, Ryougi Shiki's body, is in communion with that "place" they call the Root. So even though I see only the inside of her, I see...everything.

—And that is so painful, so tedious, so utterly pointless that I have to close my eyes to it. I will keep them closed. For me there is nothing otherwise.

—Were it that I would just sleep. Dream nothing, think nothing, forever.

—When at last this body returns to the dust, I should not even notice.

As if interred beneath the falling snow, these words of hers calmly and quietly dissolved into the dark. He said nothing. He was looking at her face in profile. And then she raised a soft voice, like a bell, to chide herself.

—What a fool I am. Ignore all that.

—Still, since it pleases me, I'll reward you once more.

—Shiki has no liking for murder. She misunderstands herself if she thinks that. Everything she has in the way of a will to homicide comes from me. She herself has no such preference. So don't worry yourself over it, Kokutou. If there is a killer here at all, it is none other than myself. The only one who ever wanted to kill you, was yours truly.

A mischievous smile as she let him in on that secret. As if to say: don't tell Shiki, OK? He could only nod his assent to that.

Still. The fleshly body, nothing but a container. But nonetheless something which had formed a self, which had grown into a foundational existence. An "intellect" of sorts, far beneath even her unconscious mind, which governed the various intellects that had taken the name Shiki. No-one would believe that if they heard it. Though in the end it's obvious. That the human being is a thing which dreams deep within the hollow of the "self."

—I shall be going soon. So tell me, Kokutou. Do you really not wish for anything? Even when you confronted Shirazumi Lio you chose neutrality. Even though it left you on the border of death.

—To me that seems mysterious. Though quite apt for you, I suppose. But don't you want a tomorrow that's more enjoyable than today?

He answered.

—No. I don't. I'm happy as it is. This, I think, is enough for me.

I see, she whispered. She was staring at him then, with a look that might have been envy.

She thought.

There is no such thing as a human being who can live without qualities, without wishing to be something special and unique. All humans live their lives embracing many different answers, conflicting opinions, antithetical doubts. Yet whereas Ryougi Shiki had embodied that tendency to the utmost, it was infinitely thinner, more rarefied, in him.

He never hurt anyone, and in turn he never got hurt. He never stole anything, and in turn he never obtained anything. He raised no waves; he lived, as if dissolving into the passage of time, an averaged life. He'd take his final breath without a sound. A normal life, harmless and inoffensive.

Yet such a life within society would not at all be a normal life. To live without competing with others, without detesting others: such is simply impossible. If in fact many do live something like that, it is not because they wanted to. They wanted to become special, and they live average lives because they failed. To want such a life from the outset is the very hardest thing. It indeed is something very "special."

In the last analysis there are no human beings who are not in some sense special. Humans are each and every one the bearers of utterly incomparable significances. They lean upon the fact that they share a species in common in order to draw close to one another; they live their lives in order to hollow through the boundaries of mutual incomprehension. They know very well they'll never achieve that, but they dream of it. That indeed is the singular "normality" which obtains for all humans without exception.

A long silence had passed. Slowly she returned her gaze to the utmost edge of the bright immensity of night.

A particularity that no-one can understand, and a universality that no-one will try to understand. Everyone who sees him sees only normality, so no-one tries to look closer. Someone who is never hated by anyone, and in turn, never catches their eyes. It seemed that pleasant days were crystallized in him. So in the end, which of the two of them was really all alone?

There was no telling. None would ever know. She stared out at the drifting oceanic sky. In her eyes, a surreptitious grief. A whisper addressed to no-one, not more than a breath, passed her lips.

—To live ordinarily, and die an ordinary death.

Ah. That, indeed.

—How lonely...

She looked deeply into a dark with neither end nor beginning. Thus Ryougi Shiki made her farewell.

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So he saw her off. He knew he'd never see her again. The snow didn't let up. White splinters filled the darkness. Like feathers they fell.

—Goodbye, Kokutou.

She said that. He couldn't say a thing.

—Silly of me. I'll see you tomorrow, won't I?

She said that. He couldn't say a thing. Just as she had, on some other day, he stood in the snow and gazed into the sky. He would watch in her place until dawn broke.

The snow continued to fall. And when the world was wholly covered, ash-gray, he made his way home by himself. Slowly, with his black umbrella, he wandered along roads unmarked by so much as a shadow of another person. In white snow. The blackness which dawn extinguished was like a relic of the night. Slowly, softly, it faded away. But no loneliness clouded his face as he followed the road home.

It was just the same as when he had first met the girl four years ago. Quietly alone, simply, singing a snowy day.

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